





AN APE, A DOG AND A  
SERPENT

*Also by*  
GERALD KERSH

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THEY DIE WITH THEIR BOOTS CLEAN  
THE NINE LIVES OF BILL NELSON  
THE DEAD LOOK ON  
BRAIN AND TEN FINGERS  
FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE  
THE HORRIBLE DUMMY AND OTHER STORIES

# AN APE, A DOG AND A SERPENT

A Fantastic Novel

BY

GERALD KERSH



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# PART I

## CHINCHILLA

### I

THERE was a woman called Nectarina, who was supposed to be irresistible—a fashionable wrecker of homes, a devourer of infatuated men when Edgar Prem wrote his notorious article about her in *Ypsilon*.

That journal is dead. Nectarina is worse than dead: she is forgotten. Nobody knows and nobody cares what Prem said about her so many years ago.

The Editor of *Ypsilon* had to go away for forty-eight hours. Edgar Prem was left in charge. He passed as a sound man, mild-mannered and diplomatic; a talented writer and a clever critic.

But once in a while Prem got drunk. Lank, swarthy, and cool; carefully dressed and elegantly barbered, Prem inspired confidence: it was impossible to guess that this formal and courteous man trailed an invisible chain which, when pulled, emptied his skull like a cistern, and that a little strong drink made him the helpless slave of his impulses. The Editor was not to blame. He trusted Prem. But shortly after he had left the office, somebody came with a bottle of Napoleon brandy—a bribe from a local advertiser.

Prem drew the cork, took a sip, emptied the bottle and went out for a walk; saw the name of Nectarina on a poster, remembered the woman as a superb brunette with a contralto voice like hot, damp fur, and sauntered into the theatre to see the first performance of *Ladies and Officers*. Nectarina appeared dressed in gauze. If he had been sober, Prem would have said to the Editor:—"What do we do with Nectarina? Praise her to high heaven or damn her to hell? Say the word."

But he was drunk and in charge of a periodical. He reeled back to the office and wrote. In Prem's city, at that

time, meat was hard to get. He entitled his article: *HAMS—DIRT CHEAP!* It was made up to resemble an advertisement. Nectarina was famous for her provocative haunches. The first fifteen hundred words of the article are not decently printable in English: I may quote only the last paragraph:—

*Nectarina kicks high, for her little shoe is aimed at the higher centres of man: when her skirt goes up, men fall down. The world is at her hams. We are compelled to admit that her thighs are smooth and white as porcelain . . . but so is every modern Gentleman's Convenience.*

It was published on the following day. At one o'clock an Army Captain came to the office of *Ypsilon* with a heavy walking-stick. Prem went to a café and ordered strong black coffee: everybody looked at him, and the waiter whispered that he had heard that Nectarina had bought four ounces of vitriol—the apothecary's assistant had told the water-waiter. Prem left the café quickly. In the street, a wild-eyed man, badly down-at-heels, punched him in the face and blacked his eye.

Shaking from head to foot, Edgar Prem went home. As he crossed the threshold of the block of flats in which he lived, a small dry man with a scarred brow and great moustache smacked him on the cheek and asked for his card, saying:—"Any time at your convenience within the next twenty-four hours, sir!" Prem telephoned the police. A detective came and, having heard the story, said: "Well, what did you expect? If I were you I'd leave town. If possible, leave the country."

The unhappy journalist threw all his shirts and his best suits into a valise, stuffed his ties and underclothes into an attaché-case, and ran away. He was a man of cautious habit and had saved the present-day equivalent of sixty pounds. He went to Paris. On the way he swore never to touch strong drink again; also, he decided to avoid the truth and to learn fencing.

At the Gare de l'Est, Prem met an American short-story-writer who told him that Mandarin-Curacao was a good teetotal drink. He swallowed fifteen of them and awoke fifteen hours later in the flat of a man named Walter Chinchilla; and so, within three days of his flight from his home town, Edgar Prem was involved in a scheme. Walter Chinchilla talked to Prem in the vague and melancholy light of that dim, bitter dawn. There was a slow drizzle. The dripping sky was curdling like absinthe. Prem never forgot the great white face which was the first thing that he saw when he awoke with a mouth of ashes and a heart of dust. This face seemed to expand and contract like a beating heart while the bed rolled and tossed like a boat in a desolate sea and the ceiling stirred like clouds. The electric light was still burning: the bulb appeared yellow and dead against a watery, opalescent oblong of uncertain daylight. Prem closed his eyes and moaned. Something hissed like a snake, and a deep voice cursed. Prem could smell coffee; he opened his eyes again. A large white hand was holding a cup, while the deep voice said:—

"Wake up. There is work to do."

"Work? What work?"

"Wake up and think."

"Where am I?"

"Here."

"But who *are* you?"

"I am Chinchilla."

Edgar Prem sat up and took the cup of coffee.

The face of the man who called himself Chinchilla reminded Prem of the death-mask of Beethoven—white, still, strong, full of anguish and triumph. The eyelids drooped. As Prem watched they lifted, so that Chinchilla's eyes caught the light and reflected it suddenly, appearing to blaze like oil. The shiny grey-black eyes remained still as nails driven into a wall; the big white face was expressionless. In this man there was power. "Chinchilla," said Prem, drinking. "You said Chinchilla."

"Ycs."

There was something about Chinchilla that crushed protest and curtailed discussion. "Tell me what happened," said Prem.

"Think," said Chinchilla. He began to talk, steadily and fluently, speaking French with an indefinable accent:—

"Throw your mind back," he said. Then he smiled, and Prem, looking through the steam of the coffee, observed that Chinchilla was still a young man, and that his smile was pleasant to see. "Throw your mind back: you were drunk. Remember. You were having a quarrel with a lady and a gentleman. The lady was a prostitute: the gentleman was her gigolo. You said that her name was Nectarina, and challenged the gentleman to a duel. I intervened and brought you here, to my flat: you said you had to go and write your article for *Ypsilon*. I put you to bed. Think!"

"I believe I remember," said Prem.

"And the rest? You remember the rest?"

"The rest?" Prem rummaged in his memory like a man without matches in a strange house at night. "The rest . . ."

"Cinema . . ." said Chinchilla. In just such a tone teachers prompt children in the recitation of poetry. Reaching to the suggestion of that authoritative and hypnotic voice, Prem said:—

"Cinema."

"More coffee . . . please, hold steady! Cinema. Shudder. Does *shudder* convey anything? Shudder. I want you to remember, please. I *want* you to remember.

"Shudder?"

"Then think again: you don't remember. Think of this. Think of *Bottle of Shadows*. Now?"

"Good God in Heaven!" cried Prem. "*Bottle of Shadows!*"

"Ah-aha!" said Chinchilla, smiling again; but this was a different smile—it made his face look ravenous and full of unworthy glee. "Ha-a-ah!"

"What made me tell . . . I'd forgotten . . . I can't think what induced . . ."

Chinchilla said: "By the way, the lavatory is only one floor down. Can I show you?"

"Please, for heaven's sake," said Prem.

Chinchilla indicated a door and went back to his room. Alone, he looked a great deal younger. His face relaxed; his mouth softened and light came into his eyes. Most of the rigidity went out of his body—he became shorter, wider, and looser. He picked up Prem's shoes and rubbed them clean on the bedclothes; took down Prem's jacket, shook it, and hung it neatly over the back of a chair.

Then he bowed and smiled at his reflection in the mirror; but, hearing Prem's footsteps on the stairs, grew grave and tense again. The journalist, returning, saw a hard, dead-faced man standing with his back to the window through which a brighter light of rising day was coming into the cheap little furnished room.

"What did I eat last night, Mr. Chinchilla?"

"Nothing that I know of, Mr. Prem."

"Remarkable!" Prem looked from left to right: the room disgusted him. He, also, had lived in cheap rooms containing nothing but a bed, a table, a chair, a wash-stand and a bidet; but he had contrived to make what he described as "an atmosphere of Prem", hanging a lithograph of Toulouse-Lautrec here and a reproduction of Van Gogh there . . . he could make a home of a place in twenty minutes. But Chinchilla had walked into this squalid little apartment and stayed: it was as he had found it; the man seemed not to care.

Below, Paris was awake. Vehicles were rolling; people were screaming. Prem slapped his pockets. "A fine mess," he muttered. Chinchilla produced a wallet.

"Yours," he said. "I also brought your bags."

"How can I ever thank you?" asked Prem.

"I do not understand," said Chinchilla.

"I'm thanking you. That is my wallet. I——"

"Of course it is your wallet! Otherwise, why should I give it to you?"

"But . . ." Prem's voice faded.

Chinchilla laughed heartily: he had a good, round laugh. "You believed," he said, "that I might have robbed you. Me! Child, child . . ."

Prem was thirty-five years old: Chinchilla was about thirty-six, yet he made Prem feel little, soft, and very young.

"Child," said Chinchilla, "little child that you are, to think that I would give a glance to your couple of francs! Baby! . . . *What?*" He became ferocious and shouted like a high wind. "WHAT?" His voice was terrible.

Prem made a gesture, a deprecatory shrug of his shoulders. "Please," he murmured.

"Pardon," said Chinchilla, and smiled again. "To return: your *Bottle of Shadows*."

"And what, for the love of God, did I say about the *Bottle of Shadows*?"

"Think. Take your mind back. Remember. You spoke of an '*hypocrite lecteur*'. I said: '*Mon semblable, mon frere*.' One's Baudelaire is not a sealed book to one. Then you spoke of the *New Shudder*. You mentioned your play. So we talked. Think: remember."

"How could I have mentioned the *Bottle of Shadows*? I haven't thought of it for fifteen years. It's forgotten. I dropped the idea when I was young . . . when I was a little boy. No. I never said anything about it."

"Think. Remember. Put back your little clock," said Chinchilla. "I said to you that I was going to make a film, a new kind of film; and you told me your story of the shadows in the bottle. Think and remember."

Prem said: "I know *Bottle of Shadows*—I thought it up. I never wrote it, but I know the story. I invented the title. But why should I have mentioned it to you?"

"You told me that once upon a time you intended to write a play with ballet," said Chinchilla. "It begins in a prison. Think: remember."

"Enough of this 'Think, remember'," said Prem, irri-

tated. "Once in a blue moon I get drunk, but thank God I can still think and remember!"

"*Calm!*"

It was as if Prem stood toe-to-toe with himself, wrestling for a fall. He stood, quivering; then sighed. "The story is like this," he said. "It begins, as you say, in a prison. A convict is going to be hanged. The scene is a naked place of stone."

"Two sous-worth of canvas," said Chinchilla.

"A warder is walking up and down."

"An old soldier at five francs," said Chinchilla.

"A bell tolls, slowly and solemnly."

"One issues a sheet of musical directions: *bong, bong, bong.*"

Prem went on: "A bell is tolling. To your right there is a staircase. Up this staircase come a group of creatures in grey, hooded. These are the souls of the dead malefactors who have been hanged in the prison. The warder is unaware of them. He looks uneasy, however, as they cluster about him, trying to make their presence felt. There is uneasiness in his walk, and in the turn of his head."

"An actor, then . . . five, fifty, a hundred francs—bah!"

"Francs!—*Please!*"

Chinchilla bowed. Prem continued: "The bell tolls louder and faster. The cluster of earth-bound ghosts move quicker. Then, from the left, there comes a procession. First march two soldiers."

"Simple."

"Then two more soldiers. Then, walking backwards, a priest. He is exhorting the Condemned Criminal to repent before it is too late. The Priest holds up a cross. The ghosts fall back, covering their faces: they are evil spirits. The Criminal snarls: he laughs. He is a man of colossal physique, stripped to the waist."

"A second-rate Graeco-Roman wrestler, suitably got up."

"The Hangman walks ahead, knotting a rope. The bell tolls louder and louder, faster and faster. The procession

goes down the steps. As they go down we hear appropriate music."

"*The March To The Gallows*, of Berlioz."

"Yes, that thing which goes down and down——"

"*Da, dee, dee-da-da-da dee-dee-dee, da-da——*" sang Chinchilla, in a discordant voice.

"Good enough," said Prem. "They go down, down. The bell tolls wildly. It stops with a crash. The ghosts wait at the top of the stairs. And then there is a silence, as a new ghost comes creeping up the stairs to join them . . . a new grey ghost, its head on one side—the soul of the hanged man. The other ghosts receive it with joy: they dance off together as a dejected Priest, Hangman, etcetera, walk up and off after them. End of Scene One."

Chinchilla cried: "Good, good! Then a dissolution, a mist. We are out of focus . . . we whirl away . . . away and away . . . wheee! . . ."

"And then," said Prem, "Scene Two. The workshop of the Toymaker. A grim bleak room. . . ."

As he made a gesture, Chinchilla said: "A table on trestles. The whole thing can be done for two sous."

". . . A table——"

"—On trestles."

"On trestles," said Prem. "A brazier burning with a wild and lurid light. The Toymaker is standing by the table with the Voodoo Woman: she is a gigantic negress."

"Two a penny," said Chinchilla.

"They are congratulating each other. The Toymaker lifts up a lamp. We see the figures of a number of dolls lying in limp attitudes around the walls. And now the Toymaker and the Voodoo Woman speak. They say that these dolls—all made in the likenesses of soldiers, bandits, and all kinds of other armed creatures beloved of children; these dolls are ready. The daggers they carry are poisoned. They are to be sold at a low price on Christmas Eve. The Negress produces a great green bottle and says: 'It remains only to collect their souls.' And she explains that she is going to collect from the graveyard of the jail the souls of



the murderers there, and put these souls into the bottle. On Christmas Night, she will allot to every doll a soul, and let the souls go free: they will animate the dolls. The dolls will come to life and stab the children with their poisoned daggers and swords. Evil will be accomplished. The Toymaker laughs and, lighting a great lamp, says: 'Come: to the graveyard.' They go. End of Scene Two."

"Melancholy and evil music," said Chinchilla. "*Dzee, bom-bom; dzee-da-dzee, bom-bom, dzee—*"

"Please. Scene Three: the graveyard of the prison. The Voodoo Woman draws a pentagram. She uncorks the green bottle and utters incantations. We see before us the graves of the evil dead men. One by one, out of the graves, the grey-hooded creatures of Scene One arise. She asks them their qualifications. The ghosts of the hanged murderers boast of the evil they have done while they were men on earth. Only two ghosts, that have murdered for necessity, are rejected. These two creep back to their graves. The rest go into the green bottle."

Chinchilla muttered: "Ammonia and Nitrogen, I think, make a dense white mist when they mix. . . ."

"Then the Voodoo Woman and the Toymaker leave the pentagram and go away from the graveyard."

Chinchilla chanted: "*Barmmm . . . barmmm . . . de-de-de. Barm . . .*"

"We come, again to the workshop of the Toymaker. The brazier is still burning. The dolls still lie where we left them. The Toymaker and the Voodoo Woman come in with the Bottle of Shadows: it glows green, you understand."

"I understand. It glows. Forget the green."

"They want to try out the dolls and the souls in the bottle. The Negress draws a pentagram. They stand inside it and uncork the bottle. Instantly—now this must be good—the dolls come to life; to evil life. They arise, moving stiffly. They perform a hideous dance, loosening up, growing more and more alive. The Toymaker tries them out—he throws down a handful of small change. This brings

out the evil in them: they leap upon each other, striking with their little daggers and swords, until the Negress says that they may break one another to pieces. Still standing inside the pentagram, she makes a strange and horrible gesture. The bottle glows with a sickly light. The dolls fall lifeless. They drop where they stand. The souls go back into the bottle. The two wicked people roar with laughter. Then the Toymaker produces other bottles, bottles of . . .”

Chinchilla murmured: “Of strong drink?”

Prem gulped, and continued: “Of brandy, of curacao, and so forth: evil and terrible drinks. They get drunk. The brazier still flickers. The Toymaker and the Voodoo Woman fall asleep. They fall to the floor and pass out. Good? . . . Good! The last to fall asleep is the Voodoo Woman. Remember that they are outside the Pentagram which protects them from the evil spirits they conjure up. The Voodoo Woman, falling asleep, rolls over. She shakes the table. The Bottle of Shadows falls down. It breaks. The Brazier flickers. One by one the dolls awake: they come to life, stiffly and uncertainly as before. Then they move about the workshop in a fantastic dance. They move faster. They see the sleeping Negress and Toymaker and, with their poisoned daggers, fling themselves upon them. The two human beings wake up—too late! They are overwhelmed. They struggle. The brazier overturns. And in the end—this is the last scene—there is a group . . . a terrible group of the dolls, fiercely stabbing at the writhing Toymaker and the huge Negress. While the flames leap up to drown them all. So the curtain falls.”

“This is the New Shudder,” said Chinchilla. “We will make something good of this.”

Prem thought for a little while, and said: “But why? But what for?”

Chinchilla advanced towards him and put a great white hand on his left shoulder. “Boy,” he said, “think of what I am saying. Think of it: remember it. But first, tell me: are you rich?”

“All I have in the world is in that wallet.”

"Are you powerful?"

"No."

"Then listen. Cinematograph Films mean both money and power."

"My dear Mr. Chinchilla!"

"Call me Walter from now on. Don't be afraid."

"Walter."

"Thank you, Edgar. I am speaking to you of money and power. What are money and power, in themselves?"

Prem said: "In themselves, nothing."

"Good," said Chinchilla. "I'd hoped you might say that. Listen to me, Edgar. I like money and I like power. I like to eat well and drink well and sleep soft: I like to have people crawling on their bellies like the snake when I look towards them. But also, I like Mankind."

Prem felt a surge of affection: he had begun to love this strong, stone-faced man—this death-mask with weak-black-coffee-coloured eyes. "I, also," he said.

Chinchilla said: "I can put images together like a furrier can put together pelts: I can string moments into a row like a jeweller strings pearls. Ask me what I am and I must say that I am nothing. *Who* is Chinchilla? Nobody . . . as yet. But ask me who I shall be tomorrow. Go on: ask me. Well?"

"Well?"

"Listen. Tomorrow I shall have these two thumbs in the eye-sockets of the world. Tomorrow I shall put this hand on the throat of Humanity. Do you hear?"

Chinchilla paused. Prem said: "Is there any money in all this, anyway?"

"God above!" cried Chinchilla. "Money! *Tfoo* on money!" He spat. "Naturally there is money! But don't you see? I want more than money. I want to make a new thing! People suffer, Edgar: day after day they suffer and die. Dear heart!—has nobody ever told you that it is the duty of a man to give himself body and soul to his fellow-men? God of Pity! Our function is, to serve Man, so that he may go higher, towards a hidden greatness. To this end

we must snatch power—we, Edgar; you and I, who know black from white and right from wrong! What? Is it for dirty money or filthy personal power that you are working for me? Is it?"

"Am I working for you?" asked Prem.

"For whom are you working, if not for me?"

"Nobody," said Prem. "Nobody, I think."

Chinchilla said: "Excellent. Famous. We are going to make a good combination. In pounds sterling you have about fifty; I have a little, also. We are going to London."

"You have a scheme? An idea? There is a plan, an actual plan?"

"He asks me if there is a plan!" said Chinchilla, to the ceiling. "Little man, little man!"

"I wanted to know only what you had in mind, exactly."

"You inspire me," said Chinchilla. "Yes. Like a blow on the head with a stocking filled with sand you inspire me. *Pfish!* Lacerated forehead of Christ! I am trying to help this man, but he will not help himself. Listen, friend Prem. You are aware that there are things called cinematograph films?"

"I am not unaware."

"You have heard of Charlie Chaplin?"

"Of course."

"The art of Mary Pickford in *Polyanna* is perhaps not unknown to you?"

"No."

"No, perhaps not unknown to you, little man! It may be that you heard—or, if you can read, you have read—of a successful picture called *The Birth of A Nation*? No?"

"Well?"

"What was *Birth of A Nation*?"

"A story . . . a picture. A big picture. . . ."

"If Jesus Christ had given you the Parables, you would have said: 'Mere stories.' Hai, hair, the cream cheese God squirts into the heads of men! Holy Lord, send me just one artiste with just one crumb of ordinary common sense! Then I can overturn the earth and put it in a paper bag.

A story, he says; a picture. Man, man! Friend—look. The picture *Birth of A Nation* was a journey. Yes, it was a voyage like the voyage of Columbus: it established the fact of a territory. It proved that there was a possibility: it opened a route. But now what?"

"Well?"

"Columbus discovered America. Or did nobody tell you? Yes, yes, he did. But he thought that he had discovered India. D. W. Griffith discovered the Epic in celluloid. It was not for Columbus to make America a power: it will not be for Griffith to make a real greatness of cinematograph film. No! Young man, young man—Griffith touched the coast: I shall make the cities. Prem, Prem—feel this hand!"

Chinchilla put out his right hand: automatically, Prem grasped it. Instantly, the large pale man gripped it in an awful iron-hard, iron-cold clutch. Prem cried: "Hey!"

"Like *this* the idea is in my hand!"

"Let go!"

"Pardon me, friend Prem. . . . Are there things you love and hate?"

"Yes, there are."

"You love what is clean? You hate what is filthy?"

"Naturally."

"I can see that you mean what you are saying," said Chinchilla. Indeed, a dim refulgence, a reflected glory shone in Prem's eyes like a golden sunset in a couple of smeared windows. "What—don't think, but answer at once—what do you hate most?"

"Cruelty," said Prem, immediately. "Oppression."

"I also hate cruelty more than anything on earth. But my dear friend, listen: The way to the human heart is through the story, through the little entertainment that keeps men and women away from food and love and sleep. The Story is the greatest earthly power! And the Cinematograph Film is the greatest medium for telling the greatest stories to the greatest number of people. Oh Lord! What we can do!"

"But the *Bottle of Shadows*?"

"A bit of nonsense, a beginning. We can make it easily. Then, having made it, we shall have made prestige. Having made prestige, we can make money. Having made money we shall make in films what Dickens made in novels; what Balzac made; what Gogol made; what Zola made. There is nothing we cannot make. And then, keeping our spirit clear and our heart pure, we may twist the world round our fingers."

There was silence.

Prem said: "It might be borne in mind that Columbus discovered America; but he also discovered Syphilis."

"London," said Chinchilla, under his breath. "Now for London."

"Why London?" asked Prem.

Coldly and clearly Chinchilla replied: "Because it happens that my fate says London. Because I have some men to meet in London. And because I have a wife and family in London. Therefore, London, friend."

Twenty-four hours later they were at Victoria Station.

2

From a distance, in a twilight a workhouse with lit-up windows looks like a heaven full of stars. As the train ran in through the outer suburbs Prem looked down at the blackening silhouettes of hideous villas against a sky of soot and milk, and said: "You are right, my friend. Begin at the top is what you say: you are right. London is the top."

Chinchilla looked at him, grunted and said: "Of what, please? Of exactly *what* is London the top? Be so kind as to explain to me precisely how and why London is the top. So now you are a geographical expert: good. London is the top. Oh yes? Top of what?" He said this like a crow made wickedly articulate; then shouted: "It is for *us* to make *where we sit* the head of the table!"

Prem started. Chinchilla was mollified—he patted Prem's knee. "Please," he said, "pardon me if I seem to

get angry. I have a good deal to beat out of my head: and so sometimes I forget that I love my friends." He smiled; a rare smile of such sweetness that anybody who saw it yearned to make him smile again.

"There is nothing to pardon," said Prem.

"Much to pardon, Edgar, too much always. Look. The lights go on: it is the eyes of the world opening. The night-bird is blinking; it is coming awake. Yes, our bird is a night-bird. *Snap*, and our eyes open. Darkness is my light: there comes the evening, and then I enter. *You* and I enter. Do you see what I mean? This big black city opens its eyes. Its darkness makes our things visible. . . ." He paused, moving impatient fingers: he had got entangled in the over-drawn thread of a second-rate idea. "Why try to be understood?" he said.

"I understand," said Prem.

Chinchilla stared at him, profoundly offended. But then the train strained and retched: a blackness fell. Somebody shouted "*Riya!* . . . *Riya!*" Doors swung back. The boat-train stopped.

They stepped down to the platform, dragging their suitcases. Chinchilla jerked his head from side to side; made something like a perrier's point, and then walked rapidly towards the barrier. Prem followed. It was impossible to keep pace with Chinchilla, at this moment. A woman sauntered into the light. "Edda!" cried Chinchilla, and embraced her, while Prem, five yards behind, became suddenly aware of a whiff of cheap scent. Chinchilla stood at arm's length, holding the woman by the shoulders. She was big and dark, with a great knot of hair hanging on a neck like Siberian ivory—a generously-made, untidy woman. She was giggling.

"Edda!" said Chinchilla. "Edgar, my collaborator."

He spoke in English. She smiled. "How do you do?" said Prem.

Chinchilla added, with some impatience: "This lady is my wife."

Prem murmured compliments, while something in his

head burrowed and scratched. What had a man like Chinchilla to do with this woman? She was too much of a woman in too little of a dress: at several points trivial bits of jewellery picked up and threw back second-hand glints of sickly electric light. There could be no doubt that she had a fondness for trinkets; pearly beads round her neck, amethystine studs in her ears and, upon her large but well-shaped hands, as many semi-precious stones as could be bought for next to nothing—an aquamarine nearly as big as half a walnut; a topaz larger than an olive-stone; a hoop of five garnets the smallest of which was as big as an aspirin tablet. Upon her wrists bangles jangled and clinked.

"Please," said Chinchilla. She walked on. A hard white light came down near the barrier. Prem saw that she was a slattern, but was surprised to see that she was beautiful. Her hundred-and-forty pounds of lazy flesh hung well upon strong bones. She walked with a slow swagger, swinging her arms. The light seemed to blush as it hit the abominable crimson of her ill-fitting dress. Nevertheless, there was a casual grace about her, an accidental poise; and an inbred slovenliness. As she raised her arm to hail a taxi he was shocked to observe a long damp tear in the armpit of her dress, from which there protruded—like horsehair from a neglected sofa tastelessly upholstered—a black tuft. *Slut!* thought Prem. *What is Chinchilla doing with this creature?*

A taxi paused. "Lemon-Tree Court, Strand," she said.

"I am very glad to have this honour," Prem said to her as they rode away.

At this she laughed. Her laugh was flat and melodious: it ran up and down like a languid finger over the strings of an untuned harp. "Walter," she said, "did you hear him? 'This honour,' he said. Oh nice Walter, to have such nice funny friends!"

Chinchilla snapped like a dog at a finger: "We are partners." His teeth clicked. "We are collaborators!"

Edda laughed. "So formal!"

The town went rattling and flashing past: it revolved



like a Catharine-wheel at Trafalgar Square and squirted away in little dying sparks of small traffic. The road seemed to bend suddenly like a stiff black wire: the movement stopped. There was a door and a flight of stairs; a click and a great heavy pink splash of light; a slam. Prem found himself in a little room lined with whitish wall-paper dotted with pink flowers; there were pink plush settees flecked with whitish dabs; six mahogany-framed chairs studded with gnarled mahogany roses; a crockery image of a black cat with a long neck; a fat-bellied doll. Upon a sideboard, between two bronze casts of women in draperies stood a gramophone. Above, between a couple of cheap Chinese saucers on wire racks hung a print of a drawing by Kirchner over a framed collection of the Flags Of All Nations, such as used to be given away with packets of B.D.V. Cigarettes. There was a portrait of Garibaldi and another of Kitchener. Out of a triad of glass bluebells hung three electric bulbs: one of them flickered. The fireplace was stuffed with red paper.

"There!" said Edda, laughing. "Nice?"

Prem looked at the room and at Chinchilla. Chinchilla looked at Edda like a man who is trying to project his will through his eyes: his face was dark red. Prem saw him stand tense. Chinchilla's hand, vaguely groping, fell upon a fat-bellied willow-pattern bottle with a slender neck: he gripped it so that the knuckles of his big hand became paler than the sallow skin around them.

Edda laughed.

With extraordinary distinctness Chinchilla said: "You want to know what I think?"

"Um?"

"Sure?"

"Sure!"

"Good," said Chinchilla, and raised the willow-pattern bottle above his head. "This is what I think," he said, calmly. Prem closed his eyes: he was waiting for a shattering noise of ruined glass; but there was a silence. He opened one eye. All the tension had gone out of Chinchilla. Edda

was covering her face with her hands and writhing on a settee. Prem thought for a moment that she was crying. He glanced at Chinchilla. The big white face had relaxed: the strong mouth had gone limp. Prem advanced a tentative hand towards the handkerchief in his breast-pocket and looked again at Edda. He saw something that made little icy spider-legs run with hideous delicacy up and down his neck. She was laughing. "Throw it," she said, "Oh, please, smash the place up."

. . . . .

It was then that Prem began to wonder what kind of woman Chinchilla had married: Chinchilla, whose every word was shaped to fit a great bright pattern, and whose most trivial gesture smacked of Destiny. It must be remembered that Chinchilla could inspire faith and devotion—he had begun to be a Master: he had an apostle, Prem, who had begun to believe in him. Nobody who inspires faith, right or wrong, can escape from the misinterpretation of the inspired believer. "Take me or leave me," says the Messiah. The Disciple says: "I take you and will not leave you . . . whatever you say is exactly right: but now let me tell you what you mean." Prem had begun to want to explain Chinchilla.

When he saw Edda laughing, and not weeping, into her hands, there began what may be described as a Theological Approach to Chinchilla. What Chinchilla did was good; or at least pardonable. Such was the quality of the man. The end, Prem knew, was ordained. But he asked himself:—

*"What does Chinchilla mean by this? There is something in this that I cannot see. The woman hides an enigma. To me, she is a great bundle of flesh: yet she must be more than that. Chinchilla, whose other name is Energy, has some deep reason for his devotion to her. In all reverence, let me see. . . ."*

So, when Chinchilla's hand hung lifeless and the willow-

pattern bottle slid through his fingers, the critical faculty of the watcher-by-night called Prem stopped, while he looked from Edda to her husband. He gazed from the still white face of the husband to the quivering bosom of the wife. Chinchilla looked at him. Anxious only to please, Prem said: "A charming apartment."

With an effort like the last heave of a weight-lifter Chinchilla controlled himself. In a cool, half-amused voice he said to his wife: "Well, this is the last time I let you find a flat. I should have known better."

She replied: "I bought that blue thing specially for you to throw."

"And precisely what did you buy that idiotic picture of Garibaldi for?"

"Because it looks nice."

"But those abominable flags in the frame there! Why, Edda, why?"

"Because they're all different. There's even the flag of South Africa."

"Edda, you are such an imbecile that I often think that you . . ." He stopped. "Tell me," he said, with interest, "Tell me exactly why you stuffed the grate with crêpe paper."

"Why? Because it's red."

"And why did you waste money on that obscene little Kewpie doll?"

She looked at him, astonished. "Why? Well, can't you see? Its arms move!"

"Its arms move: and that is a reason why. Hm. . . ." Chinchilla stroked his chin, deep in thought; looked up suddenly and keenly. She pursed her lips and began to whistle, lolling back with her hands clasped behind her head and her eyes blank with peace.

"Edda."

"You want me to stop whistling?"

"Yes, please."

She stopped whistling and said: "Louise wet herself in school and was beaten by the teacher."

"What?" cried Chinchilla. "These snout-brained dogs dare to beat a child of *mine*?"

"Oh, but she——" Edda stopped, blinked, tried to remember something.

"Well?"

"Oh, I forget. Didi cut his knee."

"Badly?"

"Only with a blunt knife."

"You give knives to children to play with?"

"I didn't give it to him: he took it, Woo-Woo."

"Edda, I beg of you not to call me Woo-Woo. I really beg you not to do it. I . . ." Chinchilla wrestled with his anger.

"Alright, I won't call you Woo-Woo then."

Prem, embarrassed, remained expressionless.

"I like Woo-Woo for a name," said Edda to Prem. "I always used to call him Woo-Woo, but he doesn't like it any more. You don't, do you, Woo-Woo? I'm sorry, I forgot again. I like calling people new names. Your name is Bim——"

"Actually, Prem."

"I'm going to call you Bim-Bim. Will you get angry?"

"Not in the least, Madame: I shall be honoured."

"Isn't he formal? Call me Ed-Ed, Bim-Bim."

"Ed-Ed," muttered Prem, with a shamefaced grin.

She screamed with laughter. Chinchilla's face twisted and darkened. He drew in his breath and held it.

Edda's left hand was groping at her right shoulder-blade. She was trying to scratch herself. "There are bugs in the bed," she explained. "Don't you think they're funny little things, Bim-Bim?"

"Not screamingly funny," answered Prem.

"We caught some and put them in a match-box for Didi," she said, turning to Chinchilla. "But they got away. Poor Didi, he cried and cried." She stretched herself like a terrier.

Chinchilla was trying to make an inconspicuous gesture, accompanying it with a frown and a wink. But she noticed

nothing. The rent at the seam under her left arm had lengthened. "Edda, my friend, you seem to have torn something just now."

"Oh, that? I didn't do it just now. It's been there a long time."

"Needles and cotton are hard to procure," said Chinchilla in a lifeless voice.

"Silly, they're easy to get," said Edda.

Chinchilla's eyes were fixed on the willow-pattern bottle; every nerve in Prem's body became taut. But still the death-mask face remained rigid, and the voice of Chinchilla tonelessly said: "If you prefer to be ragged as a gypsy . . . good."

"Pardon?"

"I said *good*."

"I'm so glad!"

She rubbed herself backwards and forwards two or three times and said to Chinchilla: "Beddy-Beddy?"

"We have to go out," said Chinchilla.

"Woo-Woo! Eight weeks!"

"We are going out." He put on his hat.

"But *Woooo-Woooo!*"

Chinchilla hesitated. Prem was reminded of a strong man he had seen in a circus, who had stood between two straining teams of horses, holding them on ropes tied to his elbows.

"Come, Prem," said Chinchilla, and went to the door. "We'll be back soon," he said. "Prem will have the sofa."

As the door closed Prem heard Edda whistling.

Chinchilla heard it too. He ran back. Prem saw him looking from left to right like a trapped wolf. He picked up the willow-pattern bottle, took careful aim at the picture of Garibaldi, drew a deep breath. But then he put the bottle back on the table with meticulous care and walked out again, shutting the door quietly. His face was pale. "Well? You see?" he said.

"Ah-hah, I see."

But Prem did not see.

## 3

There was nothing to see, but only a calm observer can recognise Nothing when he sees it. Imaginative men can't accept the plain fact of a blank space: they see ghosts in every dark passage.

For eight years, Chinchilla had been gazing with all his might into the mind of Edda; and like a would-be clairvoyant staring at a nothingness in a glass ball, he had seen only his own reflection, queerly distorted. But he continued to hope for a revelation.

He had met her at a third-rate variety show in Bedhampton, when that sombre town was—as it seemed to Chinchilla—disintegrating, particle by particle, under a steady drizzle in a brumous and suicidal October evening. He was reminded, when he thought of it, of Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval. He saw a theatre, paid half a crown, went in; sat for twenty minutes, decided that the show was even more intolerable than the weather, and prepared to leave. Then the Flying Vanderdeckens came on. They were only a little more agile than a gang of road-menders, yet they called themselves springboard acrobats. Edda was one of the troupe: she gallivanted about the stage in practically no clothes, offering the performers a handkerchief for their perspiring hands and faces. Such was her destiny: she was one of those girls who go on the stage simply because there is nothing else in the world they can do for a living. They go on the stage, or go on the streets: God has given them fine bodies and no more. They cannot act, dance, or sing; they can only undress, but their undressing is a better thing than most acting, dancing and singing. If she had made her début in the 1930's she would have earned a moderate living as a show-girl, exposing a depilated nudity at so-much per breast. She saved the act of the Flying Vanderdeckens, those earthbound tumblers who were on their way to Starvation Corner *via* damp little theatres in the damp little towns of the Midlands. Nobody looked at them

while Edda was on the stage with them, and it was fortunate for them that this was so. Before she had come gaily out of the gutter to join them they had been hounded off a dozen stages with catcalls and whistles and—in Greenock—ginger-beer bottles and apple-cores. Despite her powerfully-developed muscles and big bones, she moved, in those days, like a cluster of bubbles, light and tight, glossy and perfect, blown taut.

She fascinated Chinchilla. He had encountered such bodies before, but never such a soul. She wanted nothing in heaven or on earth. This woman, picked up to pass away a dreary evening, became an obsession . . . a maze without a centre; a problem without a solution. Edda was to Chinchilla what the squaring of the Circle is to some mathematical investigators—a folly, a torment, a craze from which there can be no escape. Her body had long ceased to interest him: he was a man whose passions and energies were engaged in vaster interests. But her soul, this evaded him. And Chinchilla permitted nothing to evade him.

He was a hunter, one who, seeing visions of a world at his feet, had fallen a victim to his need for power. He held himself in a deathlock. It was impossible for him to acknowledge the small, inevitable defeats of everyday life: he made a feint of compromise in order to get a little nearer to the Last Word. The tenacity of the man was awful. He couldn't relax his grip until his teeth had met. It was said that Chinchilla had it in him to overcome anything on earth—except his own stubbornness. He could let nothing go until he had convinced himself that he had mastered it . . . and he was a hard man to convince.

If Chinchilla had started to pick at a tangled ball of twine, the disentanglement of it would have become a problem of unimaginable magnitude, an affair demanding frenzy and patience. He was always willing to pay a pound of anguish for a pennyweight of triumph. Thus, at school, his teachers were never able to decide whether Walter Chinchilla was a boy of genius or a dim-witted plodder of

unprecedented doggedness. Even when he was a child there was a dangerous obduracy about him—they discouraged his questions, dreaded his persistence, detested his inability to accept any explanation that did not completely satisfy him. He could not tolerate a mystery . . . perhaps they were half-right when they called him a fool. As a child he was passionately eager for Truth . . . perhaps they were not wrong when they called him a genius. It is not surprising that he was unpopular; that his mathematics-master loved him, that his history-master hated him, that his scripture-master beat him, or that his fellow-boys followed him. People are attracted by strength, whether it is good or evil. Even as a child Chinchilla had strength—if only the strength of close-grained obstinacy. One had to give way to him. He believed in himself—was his own God, Prophet, and Disciple. The boy had power. Many years were to pass before he acquired his charm: that is to say, before Chinchilla, as a strong man, could learn the art of gentle condescension that is to a driving will what the soft-steel nose is to an armour-piercing shell.

But he learned it, at a price.

Chinchilla had been born in Paris, of an English mother and a Russian father who had found it necessary to change his name. The mother outlived the father, whom Chinchilla remembered only as a face and a smell. The smell was of tobacco. The face was white, shapeless, chewed-up, exhausted—the spat-out leavings of a face. Chinchilla was only a baby when his father died. His mother took him to England and died there a year or so later. A guardian sent him to school. Chinchilla wanted to study Law; studied it, decided that he had mastered it, and might have practised it. But the guardian died, and the young man inherited twenty-five thousand pounds. He was alone in the world. There were places he wanted to see, and things he wanted to discover. He saw. He learned. With a strange, cold excitement he watched his money steadily running away: he was looking for something—one great thing which he could clutch, once and for all, in a death-grip—the thing



that was to make him great. Years had passed: he had learned the relative values of many things, mastered several languages which he spoke with an accent that belonged to nobody on earth but Chinchilla. In a wildly varied succession of friendships and enmities, he had learned the jiu-jitsu of human relationship: the supple, subtle way of overpowering people by lightning feints, graceful falls, and inevitable nerve-pressures and leverages. . . . But where was the Affair of Destiny? Where was his Star? He let the money dwindle, travelled, watched, strove against thunderbolts and fly-papers, getting nowhere, always wandering.

In 1912, having a fancy to look at England again, he returned. Sheer idle curiosity led him to Bedhampton, and there he met Edda; an unfathomable mystery bound in apricot-coloured skin, an Unsquarable Circle in feminine curves . . . a laughing Riddle Of The Universe: an *x* made up of outstretched arms and legs: a Problem, a Challenge.

Everybody wants something—an Empire, a bit of bread, a palace, a hut: there is always something. But what was Edda after? He wasn't going to let her out of his hands until he had found out the motives that made her live and work. If he could have convinced himself that she wanted nothing but his money he would have been on his way in a week. At first he took it for granted that it was for money and moneysworth that she lived; amused himself cynically with her; sent to London for exotic gifts—hothouse fruits and flowers and a valuable white Pekinese. For the rest of her life she would remember Chinchilla, he assured himself. One night he met her as usual and saw her hugging a filthy little shaggy mongrel with matted hair, a disgusting beast that ought to have been at the bottom of the canal. "Where is your little white dog?" he asked. She replied: "I changed him for this one: isn't he funny? Just like a dirty old man!"

Chinchilla stared at her. What kind of deep game was this? She was trying to humiliate him: he knew such tricks. But who would have expected to find the capricious soul

of a Cora Pearl in the body of a Bedhampton slut? On the following night, instead of Rumpelmayer's chocolates and an armful of orchids he brought threepennyworth of violets and a twopenny bar of Fry's Chocolate. She ate the chocolate with avidity, and buried her face in the flowers with a cry of delight. Chinchilla decided that she was the greatest actress the world had ever seen: her great dark eyes showed no gleam of anger or disappointment. Now this, indeed, was self-control!

But he too could play a deep game. "I have no money left," he said.

"Poor boy," she answered.

"What?"

"Poor boy. If you haven't got any money left you *are* a poor boy," she said; and rocked with laughter.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You *make* me laugh!"

Had she seen through the trick? He bit his lip. "I'm going away," he said.

"Are you?" She finished the penny bar of chocolate and sucked her fingers.

"Yes. Are you sorry?"

"Um? Oh yes, Woo-Woo, very sorry." She whistled the Destiny Waltz, tapping a nonchalant foot.

"Good-bye," said Chinchilla.

"Good-bye, and thanks ever so much for the violets."

He walked away, raging. What kind of damned woman was this? What was the secret of this Succubus, this mirage, this Sphinx, this . . . words failed Chinchilla. All night long he wrestled with the mystery of Edda, as, years before, he had wrestled with Infinitesimal Calculus. But now, dawn brought no triumph: only a mad decision. He would make it clear that he was a strong man and no fool; he would tell her that to her face, calmly and clearly. At ten o'clock he walked to Edda's lodgings. She was singing as she bounced downstairs with a little valise.

"Hallo, Woo-Woo," she said. "Come to say good-bye?"

"Yes."

"We're catching the eleven-fifteen."

"What do you mean, *we* are catching the eleven-fifteen?"

"Me, Vanderdecken, and the others. We're going to Leicester."

"And who the devil says *you* are going to Leicester?"

"Vanderdecken: he's the boss."

In one of those lightning-flashes of angry resolution that enable men to break iron bars, Chinchilla snatched her valise. "What fat-bellied acrobat is *boss*? Whose boss? *Your* boss? Well listen: I'm telling you that you are not going to Leicester!" His pride was touched: it was he who had come to cast her aside; and she spoke of Vanderdeckens, bosses.

"Aren't I?" she asked.

As he glared at her in the dark passage among the lingering smells of a thousand cooked dinners, he knew that if he left this puzzle unsolved there would stay with him forever the bitter taste of a defeat. She seemed to be taunting him with her bright, childlike smile.

"You are coming with me," he said.

"Am I?"

"Yes, now."

"Where to?"

"To London."

"Vanderdecken says——"

"To hell with Vanderdecken!"

"We——"

"Do you love Vanderdecken?"

"Don't be silly!"

"Do you love *me*?"

She began to laugh. Sweating at every pore he said: "You are going to marry me."

She stopped laughing. Chinchilla smiled at last. What! Had he got through the armour?

"Silly," she said, and laughed again. His mouth snapped straight.

"You are going to marry me," said Chinchilla. "In London."

She blinked and said: "Alright," and added: "Will you take me to the Alhambra?"

He was like a man in the grip of a nightmare. They were married by licence. Leading her to a shop-window in Bond Street he pointed to a glittering display. "Choose."

"Anything I like?"

"Anything you like."

"That," she said. "Could I have that?"

Chinchilla looked at the big, cheap amethyst, and laughed. "That if you like," he said, indicating a five-hundred-pound diamond. "Or even *that*"—he poked a finger at a ruby marked *Exquisite*—£375.

"No, *that*," said Edda. "The nice light blue one."

"Why?"

"I like it better."

"Why?"

"It's blue."

"So," said Chinchilla, "it's blue. Then you shall have it." Later that day he asked: "Why did you agree to marry me?"

"Well, you *asked* me to," she replied. "You did, didn't you?"

"And you said 'Alright.' Why me rather than anybody else?"

"I like you, Woo-Woo: you make me laugh."

"Am I the only man who has made you laugh?"

"Oh no."

"Did Vanderdecken make you laugh?" Chinchilla bit off and spat out the syllables in the name: he made it sound like a mouthful of herring-bones.

"Yes, ever so much."

"Yet you didn't marry him."

"No."

"You slept with him, however," said Chinchilla, expecting an indignant denial. But she nodded carelessly.

An invisible hand took him by the throat. "Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. Why not?"

He muttered: "Of course; why not? He made you laugh. Good! Have you slept with T. E. Dunville? Dan Leno?"

"No, Woo-Woo; I never met them."

He stared sombrely into her eyes which, like convex mirrors, reflected little distorted images of himself. What was she hiding behind those eyes?

After several years he was still trying to answer this question. He could not perceive that Edda was exactly what she appeared to be—a collection of holes in a beautiful fleshy envelope—an empty-headed slut devoid of virtue, vice, hope, fear, thought, memory, taste, love, hate, greed and desire: even devoid of cunning; slothful, amoral, alive only in that she responded to certain stimuli; risible, ready to let out her overwhelming laughter at everything, good or bad. She inspired Chinchilla with something like hate and something like fear. He could not understand that she was really calm and happy: to him she was a dark and bottomless pit, an infinite depth in which there lurked something that mocked him. She could eat a duck or a crust of bread with equal appetite, and sleep anywhere at any hour. "Don't you ever get tired of sleeping so much?" he asked her. She shook her head. He asked her the same question about laughter and love-making: she shook her head. "Woman, what do you *want*? What do you *need*? What do you hope for, what do you *demand* of Life?" She shook her head; laughed and said: "Nothing, Woo-Woo."

"For the love of Jesus, don't call me Woo-Woo!"

"No?"

"No. My name is Walter."

"Alright, Woo-Woo."

Then he would swear at her in several languages, and she would become helpless with laughter and cry: "More, more!" To Chinchilla all this appeared to be a play, a masquerade: she was covering something with an over-acted imbecility. He watched and waited. Once, having been away for six weeks, he asked her whether she had

been unfaithful to him. Counting her fingers, she said: "Not very often."

He gnashed his teeth. Obviously she had not been unfaithful to him, or she could not have replied so readily and in such terms. Then doubt came—the merest shadow of a doubt. He said: "If I found that you had been unfaithful to me, Edda, I should kill you."

"Would you really?" Edda was startled.

"Yes."

She laughed melodiously. "Alright, Woo——"

"Walter!"

"Walter."

Thereafter, whenever he had occasion to stay away from home, she said to him: "I *haven't* been unfaithful to you" . . . with a certain shy anxiety. Oho, so she was trying to torment him? Chinchilla smiled grimly: he was not a fool; he knew how women behaved when they had planted antlers on their husbands.

But he wondered what she hoped to gain by this pretence. Exhausted, he shelved the problem. Time and money were trickling away. In the first three years of their life together she presented him with a son and a daughter; she seemed to lay her children like eggs—uproarious, round-headed, lusty babies, firm as apples. They fell out of bed, fell downstairs, were dropped on their heads; they were overfed, underfed, ill-fed, pricked with pins, unwashed or washed in the wrong way; but they survived. Years passed. Chinchilla acquired an expression of brooding cogitation mixed with suppressed anger, so that people were silent in his presence. They stole sidelong glances at him and whispered that they would give a good deal to know what was going on behind that powerful lion-face. In point of fact, when he looked like that he was thinking of Edda; in other words, of Nothing.

So Chinchilla awaited the sign and the wonder, the star over the stable. What was he going to do? The seed of the beanstalk that grew out of his head was, most likely, planted in the course of an argument.

Colette Willy had said: "*All the really good films are those in which the scenarist and the actors have conceived and interpreted everything according to the rules of pantomime and by its means alone.*"

Chinchilla defended this thesis with such eloquence that somebody said:—

"You ought to make films yourself."

This stuck in his mind. When, in 1914, he read in *La Tribuna* that the film industry represented twelve billion francs of capital investment, he cried: "Ha!" In 1917 he became gloomy whenever he heard the name of Zukor. In 1919 his mind was made up. He had seen the Star. It was a red star in his pass-book: he had no money left.

Poverty, indeed, was the challenge for which this strange man had been waiting: it was necessary for him to start from nowhere.

Having arrived at a decision, everything seemed to rush together and make a pattern. It was as if, in the dark background of his mind, two carbons had made contact and began to spit blinding light; the whole earth broke out in black-and-white filmic scenes. He saw the Cinema as a kind of dynamite, by means of which one might destroy a man or level a way for a man; wreck a city or clear a rotten wilderness.

Good. He would clear the wilderness, make new paths.

Chinchilla was an idealist. In those adventurous days he loved his fellow-men, and if he wanted to be a leader it was only that he might play the part of a policeman to a civilisation gone astray—he wanted to take Mankind by its hot, sticky little hand and lead it to safety across a dangerous street.

This was what attracted Prem to Chinchilla. The charm of Chinchilla held him; but it was the goodness in Chinchilla that carried him away.

Now, Prem was ready and eager to follow him to the bitter end. He was convinced that even if the end were bitter, it would at least be exalted.

He had fallen in love with the unexpressed greatness of Chinchilla.

## 4

The moon was up. Picked out in black and white, the street had the appearance of a ragged and sinister old German woodcut. Chinchilla said: "You see, my friend, what can be done with a little judicious application of light and shadow? This stinking back-alley becomes a romantic setting. It might belong to any period: to love or hate; to the hunter or the hunted; to flight or pursuit. Henceforward, you must look at things from this point of view. You must translate everything into terms of pictures. Let us go for a walk."

"But," said Prem, "your wife. . . . You've been away a long time. Hadn't we better wait until tomorrow?"

"We are going for a walk," said Chinchilla. He added, and under his breath: "In any case, the minute her head touches the pillow, she will fall fast asleep."

"An unconventional lady," said Prem. "A most unusual type of lady . . . original . . . and extremely beautiful. . . ."

Chinchilla made a little flickering gesture with his right hand. He was discarding the subject.

They walked, without speaking, into the Strand.

"Remember," said Chinchilla, "that in this country the traffic keeps to the left and not to the right. I do not wish you to get run over yet. Your time is not yet come. Not yet! Look——"

He pointed. A magnificent Renault coupé had stopped, under the arm of a policeman on point duty. "You shall ride in cars like that if you wish, and if you feel so disposed you shall have silver fittings on them. Or gold. And then again, Edgar, look; look at things as I do. That policeman, as far as the driver of that car is concerned, for the moment represents God Almighty; his outstretched arm is the arm of Fate. Assume that the man at the wheel there needed every second of time in an affair of life and death?



Or say that he had just committed a murder and was relying on getting to a place in time to establish an alibi. Just as this policeman holds up the traffic, somebody passes who recognises him. Prelude to a rope! That would not make a bad title for a film: *Prelude to a Rope!* We need a good crime story. All these people, all these millions of people, they derive their entertainment, or at least ninety per cent of it, from permutations and combinations of the various ways and means of loving and dying. Blood and sex is what they want; titillation; a provocative display of just as much thigh and buttock as the censor permits. . . .”

“Yes, they like looking at girls,” said Prem.

“It is not so much that they like looking at girls *as* girls; they spend their hard-earned money not so much for the pleasure of seeing girls dance; they are enthralled by the remote possibility that, by some heaven-sent miracle, one of the young ladies in the front row of the chorus may split her knickers in the middle of a high kick. Poor little people! And they like murder stories because, alas, there are always so many people whom they would murder if they dared. Yes, there is nothing like love and crime for bringing in the public. Bear that in mind. I think it would be a good idea to begin with something of that sort. . . .”

They were in Villiers Street. Prem said: “But what about *The Bottle of Shadows?* I thought——”

“We will wait a little for that, I think,” said Chinchilla kindly. “Look at this evil street! Centuries of vice and crime have soaked into every brick of it. Villiers Street. What a history! A stupendous spectacle . . . the life and death of Villiers, Duke of Buckingham! They like history, as long as it is spiced and sugared to their taste. Costumes! They want to escape from their bowler hats, their stiff collars, their stained petticoats, and their darned stockings; so they want stilettos, rapiers, rustling brocades, and—in place of their shuffling, nose-picking, fumbling boy friends, they want knights in armour who bow elegantly and carry out seductions with grace and manly resolution. We must give them a costume-piece, Prem! But it would

be fatal, of course, to give them history. And yet, one of these days, you and I *will* give them history; history properly interpreted. They like great spectacles. Then what about the great March of the Barbarians, the building up and the breaking down of the greatest Empire the world has ever seen, the Empire of the Mongols under Genghiz Khan?

"There is a story for you! The Khakhan, the King of Kings. He starts life as a starving outcast. By the age of seventeen he has a little army; at eighteen he is a conqueror; at twenty he is a king; at thirty he is a king of kings; at fifty he is Emperor of all men, with dominions that stretch from Egypt to the Black Sea. The whole world pays homage to him as he sits in his monstrous city of Karakorum—the greatest city the world has ever known.

"Where his horses passed, Edgar, it was said, no grass grew again. And then, think of the end of it all! He died, and was buried underneath a pine tree; and his empire decayed, his armies were scattered, the city of Karakorum fell to ruin, the pine tree died, and the dust of the Gobi Desert covered everything, so that all that survives of the Emperor of all men is . . . a word or two out of a code of laws, handed down through eight hundred years. What a story! The Mongol hordes coming like the wrath of God out of the dust, and going back again into the dust! Have you ever been to the Gobi Desert, Edgar? There is a picture in every grain of sand, in that awful desolation . . . that murderous and lifeless desolation. When I think of it I can see it already on a screen . . . the dust, the horrible sand, all wrinkled up by the wind into corrugations such as you see on an anxious forehead . . . the great rocks split by the frost. This was the breeding place of the Emperor Of All Men; there is a super spectacle! I love this massing of hands and faces under large and menacing skies! Men and clouds go together—oh yes, one day we shall make the story of the Empire that fell and the Word that survived. What does it matter if men fall, so long as the things stand *for which* they fell? Another great picture—the Peasants'

Revolt; the sacking of London—I should say the burning of the Savoy by Wat Tyler. Can you imagine the gathering of the Kentish men under Jack Straw and the March on London? I can make these things live again; I can recreate those ancient and terrible dramas.”

Prem was looking at him with eyes like stars; his mouth was open in a limp half-smile of adoration. They were walking along the Embankment when he said: “All this will take money, Walter.”

“But tomorrow or the next day we are going to have money,” said Chinchilla.

A noise distracted them. Some people were laughing. A few yards away an old man was trying to dance in the gutter. He was one of those creatures whom God seems to have forgotten. His clothes had been cast aside years before by some fastidious tramp; you would not have come near them except to burn them, and then you would have lifted them at arm’s length on a stick. He wore two waistcoats but no shirt; one patent leather dancing pump and one old broken army boot; no socks. His antique frock coat bulged and rattled with heaven knows what pickings from the dust-bins of London. His face was covered with hair like dusty tumbleweed. He was drunk. Prem, coming nearer, could smell methylated spirit. Around him stood four other outcasts. The laughter was theirs. One aged woman, so feeble that she was almost dead and so dirty that she was almost buried, stood by a toy perambulator full of rags, and uttered noises nightmarishly reminiscent of the bubbling and crowing of a happy baby. Next to her a young man guffawed under a shock of red hair, scratching himself and bellowing: “Carm on, Isadora Duncan!” The old man in the gutter danced more wildly than before. The dancing pump flew off revealing a foot that resembled a misshapen potato. Chinchilla glared from under knitted brows. Prem saw him fumbling in his pocket and drawing out a handful of small change.

“Stop!” shouted Chinchilla, and threw the money into the road. The laughter ceased. The men and women who

had been laughing scrambled on their knees after the coins. Only the old man stood, reeling, idiotically blinking. "Come on," said Chinchilla, and drew Prem away; but as he passed, he found another coin, a half-crown, which he put into the old man's hand.

Chinchilla was silent for a while. Then, heavily and monotonously, he began to talk again. Every word seemed to hang, tremble, and fall like a drop of something thick and bitter: "Hyenas. The hyenas. Beware of them, Edgar. Beware of the Hyenas. I have seen them in Africa, waiting around a wounded beast. As soon as you stumble, they are on you; fall, and they tear you to pieces. Never fall, Edgar. Stay on your feet always. Be dead before you hit the ground. They lie in wait for something more wretched than themselves. You heard them laugh? They are the hyenas, Edgar. As long as you have the strength to raise a hand, they keep their distance: weaken, and they eat you up. Edgar, if your road leads into hell, follow it; keep moving. . . . The poor old man! What can one do? For that old man, nothing. But for the babies who were born every time that clock struck"—Big Ben had just struck ten. He shut his mouth with a snap. After a long pause, his face brightened, and he said: "But I say, did you see how their faces looked in the moonlight? As if Gustave Doré had made an animated cartoon. And there again, Edgar, when we are technically better educated, I can see no reason why great artists should not make very fine animated cartoons. Why not? You have seen what Emil Cohl did with *Phantasmogoria* in 1908? Crude stuff, but the beginning of something is there. What about some of the beautiful legends of the world in terms of the cartoon? In colour, superb colour, synchronised with a kind of phonograph record. It has been done; experimentally, badly, this piecing together of sight and sound. It can be done realistically and well. Emil Cohl made his film out of two thousand drawings. Then it stands to reason that the animation of the figures was jerky and unreal. Why not fifty thousand drawings? A hundred thousand drawings? Because, you may say, it

is too many for a man to draw in a lifetime. But why one man? Why not fifty men? Fifty third-rate artists can work for their living under the direction of one first-rate man with ideas. But this means one might put on the screen a charming, fascinating, decorative representation of . . . for example . . . Orpheus and Eurydice. Or of Danko of the Burning Heart. You know that story? It is a beautiful story.

"It comes out of the plains by the Black Sea. Hundreds of years ago the tribesmen were driven into the forest by the barbarians. Being men of the plains, they hated and feared the black trees. They were hopelessly lost. At last they sat down to die. But the youngest of the men, a youth called Danko, said to them: 'Follow me. I can find a way.' So, having nothing else to do, and because a forlorn hope is better than no hope at all, they followed Danko, mile after mile, day after day, but the forest grew thicker and blacker and hope grew fainter and fainter, until at last all hope was gone. They turned on Danko, cursed him for a fraud, and knotted a rope in order to hang him. But then Danko said: 'There is a way out of the forest! Oh, ye of little faith, follow me!' And saying this, the boy Danko ripped open his shirt, seized his ribs in his two hands, tore open his chest, plunged his hands inside, dragged out his heart, and held it above his head. Lo and behold, his heart began to burn with a bright white light. It lit up the black forest. He began to run. They followed him. By the light of his burning heart, they could see their way. And so, at last, they came out of the forest and saw below them a wonderful valley of sweet grassland where cattle grazed and no man had been before. Then Danko, bidding them to live in peace and happiness, threw away his heart. It flew in a great shining arc, burst in a shower of sparks, and disappeared. And these are the strange electric flashes you see on the horizon there in midsummer to this very day."

Chinchilla flicked away his cigarette. Prem watched the little bright red spark falling until it disappeared in the

river. "A beautiful story," he said.

Chinchilla said: "Yes, but not the kind of thing that draws the public. They like stories of love and death. It is true that Danko is love and death; but his was not the kind of love that opens its legs, and his was not the kind of death that people enjoy looking at. You must think hard, Edgar; make stories. When I met you in Paris, I had, instantly, an instinctive faith in you."

"And I in you," said Prem. He opened his heart: "Look at me. I have made my living for the last sixteen years writing silly little stories, hypocritical book reviews and dramatic criticism and faked reports. All the time I have wanted to write something really great; it's an illusion, perhaps, but I have always clung to the belief that I have something great in me, somewhere. But I had to live. And so I tried to save enough money to live on, modestly, for two or three years while I worked for the sake of the work and not the wages. The same thing applies to our pictures; we have to bow a little to popular taste at present in order to get power enough to remodel popular taste later on."

Chinchilla squeezed Prem in a brotherly embrace and said: "I give you my word of honour that in exchange for that sixty pounds of yours I will give you sixty thousand pounds; and I have never yet broken my word. . . . Are you thirsty? Let us go into this little pub and have a drink."

The public-house was called "The Adam And Eve". It was one of those little licensed houses that stand, as if by accident, on the frontiers of the locality known as "The Taxi-driver's nightmare"; a dim, grim, dingy pub frequented by glum sippers of weak drinks and players of joyless games. Chinchilla ordered beer. The landlord banged down the glasses with a grunt. It seemed to Prem that the barmaid was looking at him with hatred, and that as soon as the door had closed behind them and

they were on their way again, everybody would make insulting remarks about him and Chinchilla. The silence in the bar was not unlike an awkward pause in a slanderous conversation when the subject of the gossip comes unexpectedly into the room. But Chinchilla was looking about him with the fascinated concentration of an archæologist who has opened a new tomb. He could not stop gazing at the barmaid; he stared unwinking at her white cheeks upon which the dry skin hung, loose and raddled, like a badly folded tablecloth. Scarcely lowering his voice he said to Prem: "There is a face for you. Magnificent, perfect!" Prem was embarrassed, but he remembered that Chinchilla was speaking French, and this was London. "The atmosphere! Try and reduplicate this in a studio! You can't do it. It takes a hundred years of bad taste to make a place look like this."

"But who *wants* to make a place look like this?"

"I might. You must understand, Edgar, that the real dramas of life are to be found in atmospheres such as this, and that if you have eyes, ears, and imagination, you can find an Arabian Nights' Entertainment in every fly-blow on the ceiling of a place like this. The time is coming when we are going to present the drama—the grandeur and the misery—of the common man. You must get about, Edgar, and look into things and people. . . . You must get the habit of trying to analyse their wrinkles and expressions. Because every face is a key: it is cut to fit a certain look. It opens a door. A face like that barmaid's face can, if you are intelligent, let you into a wonderland."

At this, to Prem's horror, the barmaid said in perfectly good French with a strong Belgian accent: "If you are talking about me, sir, you can shut your jaw: you leave my face alone."

But Chinchilla immediately said: "I am referring, madame, to the unmistakable signs of self-sacrifice and suffering in your face: they give it a dignity."

They had finished their beer. Chinchilla bowed; Prem raised his hat; they went out. In the street Chinchilla began

to laugh, and said: "There is a situation for you. Say we were discussing a crime, confident that that woman was, as she seems to be, an ordinary cockney barmaid. . . . But look; let us walk back. You are tired. Now concerning tomorrow. The man we are going to see is a funny little man. He is one of those Jews that like to gamble. He is one of those wandering Jews, what you might describe as a commercial nomad. It must be a race-memory dating back to the time of Abraham, when they went about Asia Minor with their tents and their sheep, looking for new pastures. You will see what I mean. He has never learned how to read and write. At least, not in English. He can sign his name, however. He had it written down for him and learned how to copy it. Do not be deceived by this: he is not a fool. He has depths. He is one of those little men that count pennies but gamble away thousands of pounds. He will walk a mile to save a penny bus fare. But he can lose five thousand pounds with nothing more than a shrug of the shoulders. He must be about sixty years old now. He was born in some Polish ghetto and started life as a buttonhole maker, or a trousers presser, or a waistcoat maker, or something. When he came to England to avoid either military service or a massacre—or both—he bought, with his last few coins, two dozen lemons which he hoped to sell at a profit of about sixpence. He did so; bought three dozen lemons and sold *them*; within about three years he was a great importer of citrus fruits. He made a fortune and went bankrupt. There is a restlessness about him. He likes change. He went into the fancy goods business, and, as luck would have it found himself landed with several tons of mixed flags of all nations, toy trumpets, rattles, and other rubbish. Nobody would buy them. He was on his last legs when, like an act of God, there came the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. His flags and stuff went like wildfire. He bought a patent—some impecunious inventor had turned out a machine for making cloth buttons. Our little friend marketed it, got out with a profit just before cloth buttons



were supplanted by composition buttons, and then went in for importing Nyassaland tobacco. This seemed crazy. He had hundreds of tons of it in hand, and nobody wanted the stinking stuff. Then the war broke out and tobacco of any sort soared sky-high. And there he is, something like a millionaire . . . a little bladder of kosher lard; a man who lives on about five shillings' worth of bread and milk a week on account of stomach trouble, and goes home every evening of his life to the bosom of his family in Hampstead, or one of those suburbs, where he is, I believe, a pillar of the local synagogue.

"I met him by chance a few months ago. He had just been to the pictures where he had seen something about Allenby in Palestine. We got talking. In a certain kind of way I like that little man. At sixty, when most men are glad enough to retire, he is looking for new and exciting things to gamble with—I mean, ventures; because I know for a fact that in his house he will not permit more than six pennyworth of coppers to be risked in one pool in a game of dominoes. His name is Pipik. And the point, my dear Edgar, is this: he is hesitating between two new ventures. They are both good. One is a thing called Wireless. The other is the Cinema. It rests with us to convince him that ours is the better proposition and that is why you are going to need all your strength for tomorrow. That is why I am going to make you go to bed now."

Prem's heart beat faster. He felt exhilarated, wide awake. He said: "And if we fail to impress him? What then?"

In a cold voice Chinchilla replied: "There are other irons in the fire." He walked on gloomily, with a set face. A beggar passed, stinking of dirt, slouching broken-backed under fifty years of hopelessness.

"Here," snapped Chinchilla, and held out a florin.

The beggar stared at it suspiciously; reached for it, snatched it, muttered something, and went on.

"What did he say?" asked Prem.

"He wished me Good-luck," said Chinchilla. "Luck, luck: they want luck! They wish vaguely for something to

come their way. And at the most, what comes? Out of the dark, a two-shilling piece. So they praise God, spend it on oblivion, wake up with a hangover, curse God, and go on wretchedly wishing for luck, luck, luck! By God, do you know what I am going to do with the Cinema? I am going to make it into the most potent weapon that ever fell into the hands of Man! The Power of the Press? I shall make that seem small. The eye sees pictures faster and more clearly than it reads print. I shall be the drug that works while you sleep: I shall get into the bloodstream and cleanse it—purge the bowels and tone the heart and nerves of the world. I dedicate myself to that. I do, Edgar!”

As he spoke he heard something tinkle on the pavement.

“What was that?” asked Prem, stooping. The tinkling object gleamed yellow in the gaslight. Chinchilla picked it up: it was a gold ring fashioned in the likeness of a snake, with two tiny emeralds for eyes.

“An omen,” he said.

They stopped, looking into each other’s eyes.

“It must be worth ten pounds at least,” said Chinchilla. “And that beggar didn’t see it, although his eyes were fixed on the paving-stones! There you are—a symbol! The snake! Wisdom, subtlety, strength, suppleness; the snake that changes his scaly old skin and breaks out, clean and new, when his time comes! Look . . . see? Its tail is in his mouth—it’s gripping tight!”

He put the ring on the little finger of his left hand. They walked faster. Chinchilla’s eyes were glowing. “An omen,” he said again.

The light was still burning in the flat. Edda had thrown some bedclothes over the sofa—a clean sheet, a dirty sheet, three blankets and two large lacy pillows.

“Sleep now,” said Chinchilla, his eyes shining. “God bless you, and good-night.”

He tiptoed into the bedroom next door. Prem could hear Edda snoring. . . . *Khhaaaaap-phooo!* . . . *Khhaaaaap-phoooo!*

He was tired now, but he hung up his coat and trousers with great care before he lay down in his underclothes. Chinchilla also began to snore. But Prem could not sleep. Words were running through his head. . . . *Thou art cursed above all cattle and above every beast of the field . . . upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. . . . And I will put enmity between thee and the Woman, and between thy seed and her seed. . . .*

Where had he heard that before? Or had he made it up? Why was it in his mind? What did it mean? He got up and looked at himself in the mirror over the mantel-piece. As he did so he started, and nearly cried out: his face was grey, blotchy, horribly old and weary. But then he realised that it was the mirror which was old and used-up: the silver had faded and peeled away. He was still young, strong, and good-looking.

Prem turned out the light and went to sleep.

## 5

He was awake at dawn, ten minutes before Chinchilla came crashing out of the bedroom in disordered pyjamas of gold brocade. Chinchilla said: "I am sorry to say that you will have to climb two flights of stairs to the bath. Trust Edda for that kind of thing. I hope you have slept well. I fear you haven't. Tonight you shall sleep in a decent bed. Meanwhile, how are you? Great things are impending. Today is one of The Days. You know how Gargantua was born? Through his mother's ear. Well, we have to inseminate somebody's ears today; but only by saying the right things at the right moments. Shave yourself clean and dress up in your best clothes. It is a pity that you do not wear a monocle; I have known a single eyeglass to work wonders in affairs of this sort. We have certain calls to make. How do you feel?"

"I have been thinking," said Prem. "You wanted a story of love and crime? A sort of sex-drama? I have been

working one out. It is based on a story I started to write a few years back."

He paused: he had been thinking of all the stories he had left unfinished, and was a little depressed.

"Well?"

"Well," said Prem, "roughly, it goes like this. . . . There is, in Vienna, let us say, a very successful and handsome actor. This actor is a nasty piece of work. When he was a young, struggling man, he married for her money a rather plain young woman who had fallen desperately in love with him. He, of course, didn't give a damn for her. Having become the idol of half Europe, this fellow finds his wife a damned nuisance. . . . In effect, something irritating, something to be got rid of, a bit of grit in the eye, so to speak. So," said Prem, putting on his boots, "he loathes his wife, this son of a dog. But she worships the ground he treads on, and being an absolutely blameless woman, will give him no grounds for a divorce and will not divorce him. *Bon.* He, meanwhile, has been carrying on an affair with a great big blonde singer—one of those monumental women, a Swede. She also loves him but he has grown tired of her and, being now about forty odd years old, develops a mushy and sentimental yearning for a pure little girl with a flower-like face who has—being young and romantic—become infatuated with him in the role of Romeo. Now here is a complicated set-up for you. What is this man to do? As I have told you, he is an unscrupulous son of a dog, an absolute pig. He is also a great actor. So, one misty evening when he knows that the singer will be waiting for him under conditions of the utmost secrecy in a discreet little villa in the country, he dresses himself in one of her dresses and one of her exceedingly conspicuous fur coats, puts on a blond wig—he is a master of make-up and a wonderful impersonator—and goes in a taxi to his faithful wife's little flat in which she lives apart from him. He takes good care to be noticed. He goes, shoots his wife with a little pearl-handled gun, and runs away. Thus, everybody will swear to having seen

the Swedish singer going into the victim's apartment; she will be put out of the way in some safe jail; the wife will be dead and the actor will be free to marry his romantic little maiden."

"Not bad; go on," said Chinchilla.

"So he carries out his low-down plan; gets himself up to pass as his Swedish girl-friend, puts a couple of bullets into his amiable little wife, and is seen going away in a taxi. He replaces the clothes in the singer's dressing-room and takes good care to hide the little pistol in her make-up box. It is all over by eleven-thirty in the evening. Then he goes home to his elegant little flat. I tell you, Walter, this man is absolutely callous. He has sent the servants out for the evening and is quite alone. He sits down and pours himself a nice big drink and lights a cigarette, and then there is a knock at the door. He opens it. Who can it be at this hour of the night? You guess. . . ."

"How the hell should I know?"

"Try and guess."

At this moment the door burst open and two children came in with loud outcries. "Daddy!" A big plump girl of six or seven bounded into Chinchilla's arms. "Why, Louise!" said Chinchilla tenderly, "David!" He held the girl in one arm and with his free hand picked up a swarthy, strong little boy who was plucking at his left knee. To Prem, he said with an ironic grin: "Behold, the fruit of my loins, Louise and David."

The boy asked: "Did you bring me a present from Paris, Daddy?"

Chinchilla blinked. Then he saw Prem's flat gold wrist-watch lying on the table. "I have brought you this watch," he said, winking at Prem. Patting the girl on the head, he added: "And for you I have a rocking-horse, but you must wait until this evening." The children ran into the bedroom. Prem heard Edda's voice; she seemed to be coming out of her sleep like a beetle struggling out of a pot of jam.

"Does it often take you that way?" he asked.

"I will give you a better watch in exchange," said Chinchilla. "Meanwhile, dress yourself carefully."

Prem was one of those men that put their earnings on their backs. His linen was always white and fine; his suits were well made of excellent cloth, and he had lean shoulders and slender hips, so that it was difficult for him to appear ill-dressed. Breakfast was ready when he returned to the living-room, and Chinchilla was dressed in rich and sombre black; over a high white collar he scowled at Edda as she clattered the coffee-cups. She was lolling half-in and half-out of a polka-dotted silk dressing-gown. "Hurry up; we have not all day," said Chinchilla. They breakfasted in silence. As soon as he had finished Chinchilla pushed back his chair and rose, making little clicking noises of irritation and impatience. "Come," he said.

Prem kissed Edda's hand: it smelt strongly, but not of soap. The two men went out into the cool spring morning.

"We'll walk a little," said Chinchilla. "Walking clarifies the mind."

\* \* \* \* \*

He was tense and preoccupied. They reached Trafalgar Square before he spoke again.

"The chain," he said, "is no stronger than its weakest link."

"So?"

"So; we have three links to forge today, and they had better be strong. I want a hundred thousand pounds."

"A hundred thousand? Pounds? Pounds sterling?"

"To begin with. And there are three potential investors: Asher-Baer Pipik, first and foremost; Byron Blake, and an old fool called MacArrow. I want at least twenty-five thousand pounds from each of them."

Prem made a grimace. "I hope you get it, Walter."

"We must get it. I shall get it. It is very necessary to me. A hundred thousand or so will do to begin with; not a penny less. A hundred thousand in cash, a couple of

hundred thousand in credit. You look extremely well in that suit: prosperous yet not conspicuously so. Rich men dress like that—men who are used to money. You have taste, Edgar. Do you know that one of the reasons why I became interested in you when I saw you in Paris was, that I believed you to be wealthy? Yet I'd rather you gave me your faith, than a million pounds. . . . I owe you a watch." He stopped at a jeweller's window, hesitated only for a moment, walked in and rapped the glass counter with his knuckles.

The shopkeeper bowed. "Good morning, sir."

"I want a watch."

"A gold watch, sir? A——"

"Platinum."

"There is this, sir, at thirty-five guineas. Or——"

"Wind it up: I'll take it with me."

Chinchilla took the watch, handed it to Prem, put down the money, and walked out. "You can't give me a watch like this," said Prem, breathless with amazement. The entire transaction had taken less than four minutes.

Chinchilla dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand and stopped a cruising taxi. "Albany," he said, smiling sweetly at the driver.

"What happens now?"

"We are going to see Byron Blake."

"Wasn't he an actor, or something?"

"An actor or something? A god, an idol in his day, my friend! Women used to go crazy over him. A baritone: musical comedy. In the last ten years of the nineteenth century he swept the world like a high wind. He had the kind of good looks that turn women into limp rags: blue eyes, golden hair, tailor's-dummy figure, an air of self-confidence; an insinuating voice; slender hands; a caressing glance—a sort of clinging manner that made women feel that they had struck him down with their charm. But as it happens, he does not like woman—he prefers the Other Thing. A not unmelodious voice, but no understanding . . . a guttersnipe . . . a monarch of all

he surveyed until he went bald: that finished him, but he'd held on to most of his money. Perverts are nearly always miserly; that is because they are always full of secret terror. He has made a packet out of some copper shares: nobody was sorrier than Byron Blake when the War ended. He spends half the day dressing himself up, and the other half looking at himself in a mirror. An ass, who looks in a mirror and thinks he sees God Almighty. His head is empty as my hat. But because he had a peachy face and wavy hair the ladies of England and America were ready to kiss his behind. As soon as his hair came out they began to realise that his voice was just a voice like any other second-rate voice. . . . By the way, how does your story end?"

The taxi stopped. "Well, tell me later," said Chinchilla, tossing a two-shilling piece to the driver. "Ha! Well, we've got to use people like this for the moment."

An old manservant opened the door. "Please to come in, sir; Mr. Blake is expecting you." He took their hats and gloves, handling them like holy relics. A sharp, querulous voice cried: "Show him in, Felloes—don't loiter!" Two seconds later they were in Byron Blake's drawing-room.

The actor was wrapped in a purple dressing-gown; a false-toothed old man with an artificial air of sprightliness.

"Walter, come in dear boy! How nice! And you too, sir!"

"Byron," said Chinchilla, "I think you should meet the Baron de Prem. He worked with Méliès and Pathé: he's joining us."

Prem blinked wretchedly.

"Not really? But do sit down! Have something. Do have something. Coffee? Tea?" said Byron Blake.

Chinchilla said: "No, nothing at all. We're in the Devil's own hurry: five conferences. Pipik, MacArrow—" Chinchilla was grumbling; he had the air of a man with a grievance. "Before, of course, it was a different story. But now, when the prospect is good, there's no holding them. Well, here I am, as I promised. I'd have cancelled our



appointment, only Prem here has got an idea into his head—he's got a story, a screen play that he wants *you* to take a part in. The man's mad."

"*Me* take part in a *film*?" Byron Blake giggled. "An old man, a very old man like me?" He looked at his reflection in a silver tray.

"That's a matter of opinion," said Chinchilla. "I think it's crazy, myself. On the other hand, nobody knows more about films than Monsieur le Baron de Prem."

"I know nothing about films," said Prem firmly, in his slow, precise English.

"Eh, Byron?" said Chinchilla, laughing. "You hear?"

"Modesty, modesty," lisped Byron Blake. "*Not* to be modest!" He looked keenly at Prem. "But what silly idea has the Baron got about old me on the silver screen?"

"A play about an actor," snapped Chinchilla. "Time, Edgar?"

Prem pulled out the platinum watch. "Nearly ten o'clock, Walter," he said.

"Not really!" cried Chinchilla, and stood up. "Look Byron, it's obvious that you haven't made up your mind about this thing. I'm sorry; but there's no time to lose now. Call it off. You ought to have come to a decision weeks ago."

"Don't be so violent, Walter! It's such a lot of money, Walter. He's an *awful* man, Baron de Prem, *awful*!"

Chinchilla said: "One might think I was trying to sell something! Are you ready, Edgar? People are funny, eh? I have five excellent backers. I come to you because I promised to let you in, and you treat me like a hawker." He glared at Byron Blake.

"A moment, Walter! Baron, why is he so unreasonable? Twenty thousand pounds——"

"It isn't twenty, it's thirty. And if it's good enough for Pipik——"

"One word, one little word edgeways, Walter! You never told me that Pipik was with you."

"And exactly why should I?" asked Chinchilla, with

indescribable arrogance. "The project lives or dies according to *my* merits!"

"But you never *said*, Walter . . ."

"Byron, you're a charming fellow, but you've charmed away too much of my time with your nonsense. Henceforward, if you please, we confine our relationship to common social intercourse."

"But I haven't wasted your time, Walter!"

"Be honest, Byron: had you made up your mind when I arrived just now, as you promised? Had you?"

The old man hesitated. "Yes," he faltered.

"What do you mean, 'Yes'?" asked Chinchilla, sneering.

"Yes. I, ah, I will, Walter."

"He will, Prem! 'I will, Walter!' What is this? A proposal of marriage?"

"Don't jump down my throat, Walter, I only asked for time to think, and now I've thought. Is that fair, Baron? I'll come in with you and Pipik, I'll come in. There."

"With me and Pipik, eh?" said Chinchilla, quietly.

"With *you*, Walter! How *can* you be so touchy? What a strange man you are! Let's shake hands on it."

He offered an unsteady hand like a bundle of dry twigs. Chinchilla shrugged contemptuously and then took it in his terrible, sudden grip. Byron Blake cried out: "My ring! You're driving it into my flesh!"

"I'll telephone," said Chinchilla, "later in the day."

Caressing his crushed hand, the actor said: "Must you go? Won't you stay and talk a little? There's so many things . . . so many, many things . . . The Baron de Prem's idea, for instance. Most interesting. There is, I think, a lesson or two we might teach the coming generation, even old has-beens like me. Eh? Ha-ha! Eh? And there are so many other things. . . . Walter! *Not* to be in a hurry! Do sit down, dear boy; Baron, do sit down. You must have some coffee; I should be hideously offended. Just five minutes, *one* minute. . . . Baron!"

Bowing stiffly, Prem said: "I prefer not to be addressed by that title, sir."

Chinchilla grunted: "He is a Democrat."

Byron Blake screamed: "Coffee, Felloes! And don't loiter!"

Chinchilla turned towards him with a face of stone, and said: "Don't shout in my ear. I dislike people who shout in my ear. You are in for thirty thousand pounds now, and that gives you the right to ask as many questions as you like. *But not on any account to shout in my ear!*"

Nearly an hour later Prem and Chinchilla left Albany.

"For heaven's sake stop introducing me as a Baron," said Prem.

Chinchilla, patting his shoulder, said: "Calm, calm! What's in a name?"

"But it isn't true!"

"Calm, Edgar, calm! What does it matter?"

He called another taxi. "Hamley's."

He told Prem to wait in the taxi, ran into the toyshop and returned three minutes later. "Claridge's," he said to the driver. Then, throwing himself on the seat beside Prem he muttered: "The child's rocking-horse; one should never break one's promise to children; it ruins their faith in Man. With adults, it doesn't necessarily matter so much: they are hardened, or ought to be. Well, now for Mac-Arrow. Another useless creature, Edgar. He made money late in life, by accident. He must be about seventy years of age. He comes from one of the Colonies. One day he struck lucky. He is a fool, but not a bad fool. For the first forty years of his life everything he touched went wrong. At last he bought a farm. The water ran dry. The stock died of thirst. He took a pick-axe and went to dig for water; because he was looking for water, he didn't find it—he found gold. If he had been looking for gold he would have found water. I should not be surprised if Mac-Arrow was the original prospector who, having dug up a fortune and wanting to have a good time, went to the nearest town, threw down a pound of gold dust and ordered five hundred dollars worth of ham and eggs. Now the fact of the matter is this: this poor old man has trouble with his prostate

gland. It has given him an illusion of youth and virility. He went and married last year some fluffy piece who worked in a penny bazaar. When he married her she looked like a five-shilling whore; now she looks like a thirty-shilling one. He doesn't know what to give her next. If she asked for the Crown jewels he'd probably make an offer for them. I met them some time ago and, although you may think me very wicked, I hinted to her that a lady of her beauty and intelligence might become a great film actress and have the world at her feet. God forgive me! Nevertheless she is screen-struck. I helped her to be. It is becoming a craze, Edgar, and therein lies the power of it all. Everybody, soon, will want to get on the screen. The films will, one day, bring something like a revaluation of values. Whether that revaluation tends upwards or downwards is for men like us to determine when our time comes. Meanwhile . . ."

A tall porter, grave as a High Priest, opened the taxi door. Chinchilla led Prem to one of the doors of a magnificent suite, and knocked. A big old moon-faced man opened the door, and said: "I thought it was Gloria." He beckoned them inside."

"Well?" said Chinchilla. "Here I am."

"Come right in," cried the old man. "Gloria's been talking about you all last night. Come on in!"

MacArrow kicked the door shut, and hurried to a side-table. In spite of his weather-beaten neck reticulated with wrinkles in which it was still possible to trace ingrained wind-blown dirt, and his horny red fingers knobbed like blackthorn clubs, there was something about him that reminded Prem of an eager little boy displaying his birthday-presents. One knotted fist grabbed a whisky-bottle by the neck, while the other offered a stack of cabinet-photographs. Prem looked at the uppermost picture, and saw an ordinary woman simpering under a fringe of light hair.

"Natural blonde, sir," said MacArrow, handing glasses.

"Indeed?" said Prem.

"Untouched," said MacArrow. "Talent there, sir!"

Two hours later they were in the street again.

"You are a magician," said Prem, pale with excitement. "I've read of such things in romances—but I never believed——"

Chinchilla stopped him with a weary gesture. "Realise, please, that I have worked twelve months to bring about the little events of this morning. Oh, by the way: you were telling me a good story. There is a knock at the door. Who comes in?"

Prem laughed uneasily, and said: "I don't know. At that point I got stuck."

"Listen," growled Chinchilla, black with anger. "You are not in the bohemian cafés now, my friend, making gay talk for scribblers *manqués*. Cut it out, this kind of joke! Is that the kind of affair in which I propose to throw away a hundred thousand pounds? Pull yourself together!"

"I beg your pardon," said Prem, stiffly.

"I am telling you for your own good. Now for Bishops-gate, and little Mr. Pipik. Taxi! Taxi!"

Mr. Pipik worked in an office ten feet square, furnished with a couple of chairs, a desk, and an ashtray. Here he loved to sit, all alone, rocking his plump little body to and fro in the manner of a Talmudic student, humming under his breath as he figured out his affairs.

Pipik never made notes, but had some abstruse private system of calculation, a home-made method of mental arithmetic. He counted on his fingers, made fractions with his knuckles, and used his teeth like abacus-beads, running his tongue over them with strange contortions of the face, crossing and uncrossing his legs and blinking about him with the agonised preoccupation of a man in search of a cloakroom, while sweat came out on his nose and forehead.

He took his little aching head out of the brackets of his

cupped hands. The figures made sense; only the human values remained to be assessed. Pipik looked hard at Chinchilla who sat, calm and relaxed, on a rickety bentwood chair: and he knew that nothing, now, could side-track or stop the man. *Determined, thought Pipik, clever, energetic, not a coward, not very crooked. . . . He'd tread on you like a worm.* Pipik recognised in Chinchilla a certain greatness. He puffed out a long breath, and then said: "So. Let's do business, then."

"Very well," said Chinchilla, tonelessly: but he could not keep an exultant flash out of his eyes. "You are with me."

"Positive," said Pipik.

"Good. Then our next move is in the direction of Paul Daumier."

Pipik nodded.

"I have been working on Daumier," said Chinchilla. "I got him to the point of negotiation before I left for the Continent. What a mule! What an obstinate mule of a man! The more you flog him the less he moves. But at last he showed signs of wanting to talk business. Then I became mulish and perverse—it was my turn. I dropped the matter and went to Paris without leaving word. So now, when I see Daumier, he'll be bursting with reproaches. 'You led me up the garden! You wasted my time! Do you want to buy Daumier-Doyle, or do you not?' "

"Don't worry," said Pipik, "he won't reproach nobody."

"I know Daumier. I have only to say the right word, now, and he'll come running after us," said Chinchilla.

"God forbid! May I never see Daumier running after me!"

"Eh?" Chinchilla raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Daumier's dead," said Pipik.

"No!"

"I should live so sure, he's dead. A stroke; he dropped in the street on Tuesday morning."

Prem watched Chinchilla. Something like a repressed smile moved for half a second at the corners of his mouth: then the face set hard and expressionless.

"Old Paul Daumier!" he said.

"Yes, poor man," said Pipik; and he too watched Chinchilla and waited.

Chinchilla pushed back his chair. "He had his day," he said.

"So. Where are you off to in such a hurry, Mr. Chinchilla?"

"I'm going to offer my condolences to Daumier's widow."

"Shouldn't you wait, better, till after the funeral?"

"No," said Chinchilla.

When the street door had closed behind them he said to Prem:—

"There is a Destiny about it. I pull and pull at things. Then all of a sudden, at the right moment, just as if there was a rubber band on it, exactly what I want comes flying into my hand!"

"Who *was* Daumier?" asked Prem.

"A man of talent, but a fool," Chinchilla replied.

## 6

Daumier had been an enthusiast of the old French school, too preoccupied to eat, too full of ideas to rest, and too busy to wash. He talked incoherently, five sentences ahead of what he meant to say, too excited to remember the ends of his words. This high-strung little man stopped working only to sleep, and slept only when, in the middle of a job of work (he was always in the middle of a job of work) weariness sandbagged him. Daumier was regarded as something of a lunatic, something of a charlatan; and occasionally, something of a genius. Everybody called him Old Daumier, but he was only about fifty-five when he died. His hair had been grey, and his face anxiously lined, since the year 1900. In his day Daumier had been a pioneer in the strange shadowland of the Cinema,

exploring the unknown hinterlands of Light and Shade in a covered wagon of a studio, back in the time of Lumiere and Méliès, whom he worshipped. There can be no doubt that Méliès was something like a man of genius, a maker of new things; a Yea-Sayer, a breaker of undiscovered territory and an innovator of new ways and means—"the Trevethick of emotional steam, the Galvani of imaginary shock," as Chinchilla said. To Méliès, Lumiere's first film show was as the Light that blinded Saul of Tarsus. He was running the Théâtre Robert-Houdin. In that gas-lit flea-pit of the 'nineties, he ran trick-shows of conjuring. But he knew how to tinker with machinery, how to draw mechanical diagrams and plans; how to throw paint as a political caricaturist, how to run a punch-and-judy show, how to wire up electrical apparatus; Méliès was handy at everything. After thirty-four years of life, he found his trade. In about eight minutes he discovered that God had meant him to be a film producer. Now, at last, he had captured the Fantastic.

He had captured the Fantastic . . . yes, as Gilliatt, in the cave under the sea, caught the Devil-Fish. A dispassionate observer, looking across the cool distance of forty-odd years, wonders whether the man clutched the dream or the dream strangled the man. He thought of new ways of approaching everything, from a species of antediluvian Silly Symphony to a primeval forerunner of the March of Time.

Daumier also had lost his heart to the concept of the animated picture. He and Méliès became friends. Daumier was present at the birth of the Dissolve. He saw the discovery of slow-motion photography, of double-exposure, rapid-motion, masking.

Daumier forgot what his wife looked like in the 'nineties, and he forgot what his home looked like; but he never forgot the studio of Georges Méliès, where, in a nauseating stink of over-heated people and metal, under a roof like an inverted *V*, among stacked props—colossal plaster scallop-shells, strange statues, papier-mâché eagles, and



sets of topsy-turvy rooms, in which the Master had made men walk on the ceiling—he had left a portion of his soul.

He brought away from this strange studio something that looked and sounded like madness.

He saw the beginning of Méliès, and also the beginning of the end of Méliès. It is an old story. The Master didn't understand business. His organisation needed capital. A gentleman came forward, examined the prospect, talked gravely, nodded solemnly, paced the floor seriously; cautiously brought in experts, advisers, super-experts, commentators; went into conference on behalf of the Société d'Etudes Industrielles et Commerciales; said that the project was approved, stung Méliès for twenty-five thousand francs, and evaporated.

It was like taking candy from a child. That is to say, it could be done easily first time; but stickily, and not without something of an outcry. Méliès, the robbed baby of commerce, soon stopped screaming, but he never forgot. When another man came to see him, talked of experts, looked grave and said something about investing a million or so in *Star Films*, Méliès, too exasperated even to shriek at him, kicked him out.

But the newcomer was Grivolas, and there was no catch in his proposition. Monsieur Pathé, financially wiser and commercially colder-headed, welcomed him. The money was there. Pathé got it, two-and-a-half million francs. He rose; Méliès fell. God knows what he said, between the bitter aftertaste of the first folly and the poisonous hangover of the second. Whatever it was, Daumier heard it.

Méliès disappeared. Daumier started to make pictures, went to Sweden, to Italy, to America, and so, in 1916, to a studio of his own near Putney. Twelve years were to pass before Méliès was found again, selling sweets off a barrow at the Gare Montparnasse. But Daumier—simple and cunning, single-minded and savage—made several pictures, one of which made money. His firm was called *Daumier-*

*Doyle*; if Daumier's taste in entertainment had matched his understanding of the technique of production, everything would have crashed among the dust and ashes of premature masterpieces. But Daumier could shudder deliciously over the Mysteries of Paris; he sobbed like a child at the death of Little Nell, and could be relied upon to leap to his feet and shake a clenched hand at the Mortgage-Holder in the old melodrama.

Nevertheless, the ruin of Méliès was indirectly the ruin of Daumier. He developed an unreasoning distrust of all the world; despised lawyers, detested financiers, feared investors, and money-on-paper. Daumier would have starved to death if he had not met Doyle, who gave him a large sum of money to make a film about a business man who sees the Light and washes in the Blood of the Lamb.

It was one of the most ridiculous failures of its time. But Daumier came to England with some of Doyle's money, made contact with a few admirers, got hold of a group of empty buildings, and so became head of *Daumier-Doyle*. The American millionaire had no connection with the business: Daumier had added his name on the spur of the moment because the names of all the best film companies were hyphenated, and the alliteration pleased him. He made films as a child tells lies, inventing from moment to moment as he went along; innocently, intensely, and hurriedly. You never knew what was coming next, or how anything was going to end. But nobody cared about that, in the wild old days.

Daumier might have made a fortune. But he did not know how. In business, as in love, one must give in order to take. As for money, it is like the string in the game of Cat's Cradle: one man alone can't handle it: loop, cross, parallel and double-cross must be passed from hand to hand . . . until somebody's finger slips and somebody else is left holding the empty circle, the old Zero Sign. Daumier tried to be alone. He trusted nobody. A good businessman trusts all men—having first tied their hands.

A man like Daumier was bound to end with nothing.

Upon this theme Chinchilla could speak eloquently, even brilliantly: "He was nothing but a grave in which he buried himself. He dragged himself by the nose into the slaughter-house. Daumier! A poor fool! Greedy, and therefore a coward. He wanted to be a one-man magnate on a cash-and-carry basis. Instead, he turned out to be the little boy in the fable—or was it a monkey?—who shoved his hand into a jar of nuts, grabbed such a fist-full that he couldn't pull it out, didn't have the sense to drop a little, and so got nothing."

Chinchilla whispered this to Prem on the day of Daumier's funeral, looking so sombre and terrible that everybody offered him solemn condolences, mistaking him for the chief mourner.

When he was sure that nobody else could hear he spat out great mouthfuls of similes and metaphors, sharp as nails, and banged them home with illustrations and examples which, right or wrong, struck like hammer-blows. He talked in this way for nearly fifteen minutes.

"Why, you sound as if you hated the poor man!" said Prem.

Chinchilla replied: "I did not hate Daumier. I despised him. He might have achieved something. Instead, nothing was being done, and he was on the very edge of bankruptcy. And he would not listen to reason: he tried to run a film company like a little grocery shop. He was afraid of anything that seemed business-like. His absurd Company was organised like God knows what. Daumier, Daumier, mind you, Daumier alone had to be the Boss. He had two partners—his wife, and his brother-in-law who had been fool enough to put all he had into the business. Business? I beg your pardon. Shambles, mess, chaos, dust-bin. Businesses are not run like that."

Prem was astonished, and said: "But . . . excuse me . . . nobody, my dear Walter, speaks more bitterly against big business than you do as a rule."

Chinchilla snapped: "Don't be more of a fool than God made you. Business for the sake of business is as disgusting

to me as money for the sake of money, or power for the sake of power. Bear this in mind: all the ideals in the world must end in a mixed-up mess like a hog-wash unless, in conjunction with ideals, a man acquires an efficient manner of living. Do you understand me? Efficiency, in everything, is another word for Simplicity, for Speed. A competent cook is Efficient—otherwise you will find chocolate in the soup and garlic in the coffee. It is easier to be Efficient than inefficient: efficiency conserves the energy of a man. A man like Daumier is damned from the start.”

“He was an Artist, I dare say: not a business man.”

“Listen, Edgar. When I speak of the efficient conduct of a business, do I mean that I am in sympathy with exploiters or money-grabbers? No. Look here. You want to make good, big things. So do I. For whom do you want to do things, make things?”

“Everybody,” said Prem.

“Everybody! You might, for instance, circulate a book to alter the face of the earth. Yes; but with Daumiers making the paper? With Daumiers running the presses? With Daumiers in charge of bookstalls? Eh? With Daumiers navigating your transport and mails? Get out! Daumier means disorder, much, waste! Listen to me: the most efficient thing on earth is Big Business. We, my moist-eyed Prem, are going to borrow its efficiency. Has it occurred to you that all the genius of the world is harnessed to the power-house of Commerce?”

“It has.”

“It has occurred to you that Commerce has become great on earth by exploiting the brains of men?”

“Yes.”

“So. Now let it start occurring to you that by the time I am finished, the good brains of good men will be exploiting Commerce. The donkey will carry the man, instead of the man carrying the donkey. See? That Daumier! He wanted to be big. Him! Gah! He belonged to the days of iron coffers, hand-copied books, flea-bitten gentlefolk,

castles with portcullises, parchment, the Black Death—*ptfoo!* In films he had no place.”

“But why are you so angry? He did make a certain reputation. He did make one or two decent films . . . anyway, one decent film.”

“In six months more he would have been in Carey Street.”

“Where is that?”

“You go there to file your petition in bankruptcy.”

“But forgive me, Walter—say that *is* so. I, for example, am not a business man. Is that something against me?”

“No. But if you insisted that you knew best about the making of a great Company, I should spit right in your eye and call you an imbecile. In an Organisation, everything works together, and everything at the same time keeps in its proper place. Thus, great things get done. If Daumier had confined himself to working at his proper job instead of playing at being a Business Man, he would have got both of the things he wanted—big money and big pictures. Instead, he frittered himself away and got nothing.”

“You mean to say that he should have worked for a Company?”

“He ought to have worked in co-operation with efficient executives and other men efficiently carrying out their jobs. Did I say *for* anybody? You know I did not. If Daumier had worked with us, he’d probably be alive now, doing what he wanted to do. As it is, what is there of all he had? Worms and bones.”

“But Walter—forgive me—how can you, of all men, dislike Daumier for doing what he wanted to do?”

“He did not do what he wanted to do!”

“But he didn’t want to work with us or anybody else. He wanted to work alone, and so he worked alone.”

“He wanted to play at being God Almighty—everything at once. So there he lies, eh?”

“Walter . . . that being the case, he did do what *he* wanted to do. He didn’t do what *you* wanted him to do.”

Chinchilla grew rigid. "God gave me patience!" he said. "Did I say I wanted him to do anything?"

"Forgive me, but you conveyed the impression. You sounded so bitter, as if you hated the man."

"I do not hate," said Chinchilla. After a long, concentrated silence, he muttered: "I told him that it didn't pay to be obstinate with me. And now his widow has sold all he ever had, for half of what I would have paid him if he had not been obstinate with me."

Prem exclaimed: "What! Madame Daumier did a deal with you before her husband was even buried?"

Chinchilla shrugged. "She is no hypocrite, that lady. Daumier meant nothing to her. She was glad to be rid of him. What can you expect? He ignored her for twenty years." He chuckled. "And would you believe it? She has a lover—that old trout!"

All kinds of gloomy, sordid pictures came into Prem's mind. He sighed, and suddenly felt alone in the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Prem was seventeen he said that he was going to be a great poet. If his father had been alive then, he would have cuffed his head and kicked him out of doors. But his widowed mother, who loved him very dearly, gave him a writing-case which contained silver penholders and scissors, an ivory paper-knife, a blotting-pad, and a book of the finest white paper bound in crimson morocco, upon the fly-leaf of which she wrote: *For my son's dreams*.

The book was so clean and beautiful that Prem never dared to use it, until the day of Daumier's funeral.

Then, indefinitely unhappy, he jabbed one of the silver-mounted pens into an inkpot and wrote:—

The grey, faded afternoon lingers forlorn and dispossessed, while her dark enemy pins up the veils of Dusk and hangs out the evening star. A modest crescent moon is rising, with a whisper of wind. The Night is coming like a Sister Of The Poor in a rustling blue-black gown.

## PART II

### THE IMPLACABLE HUNTER

#### I

ONE evening, twenty years later, idly rummaging among a litter of old letters and other rubbish in a discarded trunk, Prem found this book. It had a stale smell of mice and dampness. The fine red leather covers were warped and faded and disfigured by a patch of mildew. He opened it, and shuddered as a small insect ran out. The binding broke, and little flakes of dried-up glue pattered down. The inscription on the flyleaf, written in rich black ink, had not paled. Prem looked at it and wanted to weep. He turned the page. *The grey faded afternoon . . .* "Good Lord!" said Prem. Then he turned another page and found nothing; only a yellow patch. He riffled the leaves with an uncertain thumb. Only dampness, decay, Time, and the teeth of mice had marked the paper. "For my son's dreams," said Prem, laughing a little; and rose rather unsteadily, still holding the book, and kicked the trunk shut.

He walked out of the spare room into his study, where the deep carpet at once silenced his footsteps. Bright light from half a dozen scattered lamps gleamed on polished walnut furniture and was reflected in the rich leather and gold of five thousand books. The shadowy dark green velvet curtains were drawn. Upon the desk, which was as big as a bridal couch, a prodigious silver inkstand caught his eye and winked; and it seemed to Prem that the sharpened pencils which leaned in the porcelain pot twinkled and stood upright like the bayonets of a guard of honour as he closed the door. Here a man might work in peace and quiet. The flat was soundproof; the world muttered ten floors below.

Prem liked to stand with his back to the fireplace. He walked over there now, and having arrived was about to turn, when he saw his reflection in the mirror which hung

there. It was a beautiful and valuable mirror in a frame of silver and enamel composed of little lizards chasing one another around an oval path of lapis-lazuli. In this frame Prem's face appeared. He stared, appalled, and put out a forefinger to touch the glass. The man in the mirror raised a tremulous hand and pointed at him. "Is this me?" Prem wondered. Then he looked down at the notebook, shook his head in a bewildered fashion, and looked more closely at the face the mirror reflected.

From the silent, deserted places in the darkness under the high dome of his skull things like bats unhooked themselves one by one and came fluttering down. He stared at himself, fascinated, and remembered how, many years ago when the world was young and beautiful, he had stood before a mirror in Chinchilla's flat. But then it was the mirror which had been blotched and grey—not Prem. Now this mirror was a clear, true mirror. He saw himself not as a man, but as an empty bag, which might once have been filled by a man; and it seemed to Prem that in his hand he held the symbol of himself, a book of hand-made paper hopefully inscribed and dedicated in love and faith, but unused and neglected and left in the dark to be eaten away by the tiny creatures that live by God's will to make rottenness out of the good things that men, in their idleness, abandon.

Prem went to his desk and sat there with the old book open in a clear pool of lamplight. His hand went automatically to a little table beside him, where there were several bottles, a syphon and some glasses. Prem poured himself a long, strong drink and lit a cigarette. Then he picked up his favourite pen, and wrote:—

*Every man must bear the weight of his own dust. . . .*

He emptied his glass, filled another, drank half of that and felt somewhat better. It seemed to him that his head was clearing like a valley when the morning sun burns off the night mists. Now he would write it all down. Now was the time to make a start.

He dipped the pen again: it had dried. But first he



needed another drink; just one last drink, and then he would start to say what he had to say. . . .

## 2

If my mother could have lived to see it she would have been delighted by the photograph of me which was printed in one of the glossy picture-papers last week. It was one in a series entitled *Great Contemporaries*. There you see me, looking devilishly distinguished, in an attitude expressive of profound thought. It is a neat job of printing, in soft sepia, skilfully touched up to make me look like a strong, gentle, grave, handsome man of marriageable age. My brows are slightly contracted, as if in concentration, so that I seem to be brooding over gigantic projects but, as a matter of fact, I was a little drunk when the picture was taken, and was frowning in order not to grin idiotically. Chinchilla hates to have me portrayed as flippant. His dignity must be reflected in his associates; otherwise he is quite capable of smashing them in a fit of irritation, or banishing them as Queen Elizabeth put away her mirror when it dared to show her with pouchy eyes in a haggard face. So I am dignified. I have always had the kind of countenance that automatically adopts an expression of genteel detachment. Even butlers in great houses have always treated me as a gentleman. This, perhaps, was what first caused Chinchilla to become interested in me. Looking at me in the old days you might have mistaken me for a knight, high spirited as an eagle and full of fire as Vesuvius, in spite of the delicate cast of my features and my ivory pallor. Yet the fact remains that I never had much more courage than a fieldmouse, and could never boast the will-power of a clothes-moth. My father, if he could have known how I was going to turn out, would have drowned me at birth. He was a soldier. Had he lived I should have been a soldier too, and then, no doubt, I should have died of terror the first time I heard a gun go bang. But he died. I, having a certain little talent, thought

I could become a poet. My mother knew the proprietor of *Ypsilon* and got me a job on that sycophantic journal of the fine arts. Then she died. If she had not died, I should still be there, because, for fear of hurting her feelings, I never drank or swore or misbehaved myself in any way. But one day I got drunk, printed an insulting paragraph about some popular soubrette, and ran out of town to escape the consequences. If I had not been a born coward I should have stayed; it would only have meant one of those idiotic East European duels in which nobody ever gets any injury that a finger-bandage won't patch up. But I lost my head and ran to Paris, got drunk again, and was picked out of some low haunt by the man Chinchilla. For the past quarter of a century I have been wondering just why he picked me up. It is past praying for now. I suppose I have gained considerably by that accident, for I am among the most highly paid men in the country. My photograph appears in all the illustrated periodicals; I am courted and flattered wherever I go, and am held up as an example to wide eyed little boys who want to be engine-drivers or poets. "Be like Edgar Prem," their mothers say. "He also wanted to be an engine driver or a poet once upon a time, and look at him now—a friend and partner of no less a person than Chinchilla!" And so I am. Ambitious young men who are intolerably arrogant elsewhere are sweet as honey in my presence; exquisitely beautiful young ladies renowned for their cold aloofness smile seductively at me, invite me to their flats to see their press cutting books, and give vent to amorous sighs as soon as they see me. Husbands are ready to lend me their wives; mothers conspire to leave me alone with their daughters; authors give me presentation copies of their books. The other day a playwright sent me a pineapple. If I go into a bar the whole place goes *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop* like a motor-bike as everybody mutters *Prem*. Sidelong glance meets sidelong glance while elbow nudges elbow. I am great. Why? I know Chinchilla. I speak to Chinchilla, exchange jokes with Chinchilla, and even touch Chinchilla. If he and I

go out together we are blinded by a running fire of camera-men's flash-bulbs. I receive twenty-five hundred letters a week, two thousand of which implore me to introduce the writers to Chinchilla. The odd five hundred contain either anonymous abuse, or requests for jobs. Not long ago an old lady threw herself down in front of my car and refused to move unless I introduced her to Chinchilla. She was put in a strait-jacket by five policemen and wheeled away on a barrow, still screaming for Chinchilla. This kind of thing has given me a certain celebrity, so that my address has to be kept secret and my telephone number—like the Sacred Name of Jehovah—unmentionable.

I am, in effect, the high priest of a God. Only yesterday a young actress was discovered in bed with an ink-fingered office-boy of sixteen: he had told her that he filled Chinchilla's inkwells, and promised to put a word in for her. Imagine, then, my power and glory—the greatness of Edgar Prem who calls Chinchilla "Walter", and eats luncheon with him.

Chinchilla was almost penniless and completely unknown when I met him, and yet he could always make people feel important by virtue of his approval. His stamp-licker, a boy of fourteen, regarded himself as a little Lord Privy Seal. Chinchilla never had a secretary—only Secretaries of State. Messenger boys in his service became couriers; and even the old women who scrubbed his offices considered themselves as Ladies-in-Waiting and wore their shawls and bonnets with a certain air of mystery. He could always make his underlings feel portentous. I believe that much of his greatness has depended upon this kind of thing.

I never was a Baron, but Chinchilla persisted in referring to me as the Baron de Prem until I almost came to believe that I really had inherited such a title. He could always manage to be more convincing than the honest truth. Once we had an electrician whose name was George; but one day in a moment of whimsy, Chinchilla addressed him as Sebastian. For the rest of his life, therefore, George was Sebastian; even his wife called him Sebastian. Chinchilla

could inspire men and women with a fanatical belief in his infallibility. He bought a Delage motor-car as big as a hearse, had it painted lemon yellow, and picked out of the gutter a battered old soldier named Ted, for a chauffeur. Chinchilla frequently picked people out of the gutter, reconstructing them according to his fancy. This chauffeur, Ted, who had been a sociable kind of a fellow, at once developed an impenetrable reserve. Once upon a time he had been a Sergeant in a crack regiment. Now he was promoted; as Chinchilla's chauffeur he became lofty, scornful of his fellowmen.

He used to while away long hours playing with a puzzle-game called "Trap the Tiger", which consisted of four little balls in a glass-topped box. The player was supposed to roll the balls into four holes in the corners of the box. I have watched Ted straining every muscle and, after an hour of intense concentration, trapping three of the balls. His forehead perspired as he manœuvred the fourth ball around the rim of the last hole. It rocked and fell in—whereupon the other three balls rolled out. Ted would wipe his face, then, and say: "It's impossible, sir. It can't be done. There's something wrong with this gadget: it's impossible. Take Mr. Chinchilla to do a thing like this here, sir."

Again, there is poor Tito Cenci who ran the Hotel Cenci. He must be dead now: twenty years ago he was fifty years old—a bouncing, lard-faced man with irregular eyebrows like burnt matches and a worn-out little bristly moustache. His mouth and eyes were round: he always looked pleasantly surprised, like a man who has just succeeded in blowing a smoke-ring.

*Give my friend the Baron de Prem your most particular attention,* Chinchilla wrote on the back of a visiting-card.

It worked like a strange new drug. When I showed this card to Tito, he drew a deep breath and gazed at me moist-eyed with love and devotion. Then he went into the controlled hysterics of a delighted restaurateur. I was Chinchilla's friend? *Basta!* That was enough—that was beauti-

ful. He would find me a room. He would sleep on the coals to make room for a friend of Mr. Chinchilla—he would sleep in the street. He panted like an old spaniel, bursting with inexpressible adoration, and sat me in a soft easy-chair; poured me a glass of his best sherry, and chased away a fly that buzzed near my head.

"He also is a nobleman, Monsieur le Baron," said Tito. "Mr. Chinchilla is a great nobleman, a fine man, a beautiful man, Monsieur le Baron."

"Simply call me Monsieur Prem, please," I said.

"Ah, there speaks the true nobleman! Like Mr. Chinchilla. So nice, so lovely! There is a room with a new bath. You would like that?"

"Anything so long as it is clean and not too expensive," I said.

"I see to this! You like feather-bed? I puttum. You tell me what kind flowers you likea best and I puttum."

"There is no need to take all that trouble, Monsieur Tito."

"Trouble? Oh no, no, no! For Mr. Chinchilla?" He kissed his fingertips. "For him, all I got!"

"You like Mr. Chinchilla, I see."

"Like? Me? *Like* Mr. Chinchilla? For Mr. Chinchilla I run to the devil, I jump down a hole!"

He poured out more sherry, offered me a Turkish cigarette, filled his lungs with air and gasped out his story.

Tito used to be a waiter in a famous City restaurant. He was saving his money very carefully in order to start a restaurant of his own. After many years he scraped together five hundred pounds. Then one of the customers, a wealthy financier who ate every day at Tito's table, said: "Buy so-and-so and you'll double your capital in a fortnight." So Tito bought five-hundred-pounds-worth of this stock. In seven days his capital was worth about seven-pounds-ten and his life savings had gone forever down the sink of the City. He was brokenhearted. Chinchilla, who occasionally ate a meal in the restaurant, saw the black misery in Tito's eyes, and asked him what was the matter.

Tito told him: he was a ruined man, no nearer to his heart's desire than he had been twenty years before. Between the sweet and the coffee the whole truth came out. "It serves you right for being such a fool," said Chinchilla, calling for his bill and scrutinising each item carefully. The total was five shillings and threepence. He felt in his pockets and discovered that he had come out without any money. "It does not matter," said Tito, unhappily, "next time will do." But Chinchilla glared at him with haughty astonishment, and said: "Get me a pen and ink." He wrote a cheque, threw it on to the tray, said "Keep the change," and strode out. Tito looked at the cheque and fainted away: it said *PAY Tito Cenci . . . THE SUM OF Five Hundred Pounds Five Shillings & Threepence*. They threw a glass of water in his face and brought him round. He arose, rushed out, started the Hotel Cenci, and prospered from the start. When he wanted to pay back the money Chinchilla gave him another stare and said: "That was not a loan. It was a tip."

*Keep the change and buy yourself a little hotel*—that was Chinchilla's way. Tito's voice trembled and broke at the thought of it. "Leave it to me; I do the best to please you—there is nothing too much trouble for me to do for you—it is a pleasure."

Later, he said to me: "Soon I get you some beccaficos." "What are beccaficos?"

"It is a leetle bird and he lives on figs; a great luxury—the beccafico is nearly all dead now; extinguished."

"But why should you trouble?"

"Beccaficos is impossible to get. I get them for *you*!" He closed his eyes and smiled.

At home I used to know an old and romantic charwoman whose husband was a street-cleaner: she once said to me, "He's better than nothing, however—I shut my eyes and think of Jan de Reszke."

Tito was shutting his eyes and thinking of Chinchilla.

## 3

The fire is out, the room is empty, and I am alone with the comfortless heat of the steam-pipes and the bloodless light of the electric globes.

There was a smelly, green-painted shop near the Studio, where a big-toothed woman in tweeds sold animals. I forget the date—it was on a Saturday. We were passing through the empty street. A thin drizzle was falling, and the air was thick and hot. All of a sudden Chinchilla stopped in front of the shop and said: "Look at the poor beast." He pointed towards a cage in the window. There, looking more dejected than anything else in the world, sat a shivering pup. "I am going to release him from that," said Chinchilla.

He pushed open the door. A bell tinkled and a parrot screamed. The proprietress came out of a back room. "I want that little dog," said Chinchilla.

"The terrier?" she asked.

"Is there more than one dog in your window, madam?"

"Um, ah, the terrier. . . ." She grasped the situation in an instant. "Well, sir, I don't think I can let you have him. Somebody has him on order."

"For when on order? To be delivered exactly when, madam?"

"Next Tuesday."

"How much?"

"Well, he's a very good bull-terrier, you see. He's one of Fogle-White's pups. His father——"

"I am not concerned with his family. How much?"

"You see, the person paid a deposit."

"What deposit?"

"Ten shillings."

"As deposit upon how much?"

"Ah . . . three guineas."

"I'll give you four guineas." Chinchilla dragged out a five-pound note and offered it. The woman took it, and opened the cage in the window. The pup squealed like an

uncoiled hinge as she scooped it out with one hand and gave it to Chinchilla. He lifted it to eye-level.

"I'm sorry to part with him," said the woman.

Chinchilla replied: "I offer you my condolences. Please keep the change. Good-afternoon."

In the car he contemplated the pup, which was hysterical with joy, and said: "To this dog, no doubt, we are gods of deliverance."

"Walter," I said, "you have a good heart."

He thrust the pup into my hands. "This is for you, from me," he said, while the unhappy little creature lacerated my hands with claws like crochet-hooks.

I began to protest that I didn't want a pup, and that I had no interest in dogs of any kind.

"You need a dog," said Chinchilla.

"Seriously, my dear friend, I don't need a dog."

"He has a solid Anglo-Saxon air," said Chinchilla. "Call him Gurth."

The pup relieved himself all over my waistcoat.

"You had better worm him every fortnight for the first three months," Chinchilla added. "Cover him with the corner of your coat—the poor beast is shivering. When he grows up he will need a spiked collar: it will suit him."

"I have no time to look after dogs," I said.

"Find time," said Chinchilla.

There was nothing more to be said: I had a dog, and that was that. Gurth was two months old and had a swollen pink belly like a gigantic gooseberry; transparent ears, teeth like needles, a red nose, and big feet.

"He looks," I said, "as if he'd burst like a balloon if you stuck a pin in him."

"Then don't stick a pin in him," said Chinchilla.

The pup fell asleep under my coat. I didn't want the animal, but there was nothing to be done about it now. We rode back to town at high speed, because time was slipping away, and it was necessary to start work on our first production.

"Men love dogs," Chinchilla muttered. "Why?"



"Because dogs love men?" I suggested.

"No. Men love dogs because dogs lie at their feet and worship them. A dog really feels that his master is the only thing in the universe fit to adore. Beat a dog, starve a dog, vent your liverish ill-temper on a dog—you will never shake his devotion to you. Kill a dog, and even while you are tying the stone to his collar he will lick your hand. You must be right: you are the Universe. No man ever loved a dog one-tenth as much as a dog loves a man. Part of our self-esteem is dependent upon dogs of one sort or another. Every man needs a dog. Any dog will do, but the better the pedigree the greater the sense of power in the man."

"And this pup—is he really of a good breed?"

"It doesn't matter. He has a good head; he will be intelligent and devoted. I can tell."

"Have you ever had a bull-terrier?" I asked.

"I? What for?" said Chinchilla, genuinely astonished. He became thoughtful for a few seconds, and then spoke in a gentle, affectionate tone. "Now, Edgar, let us concentrate on work."

4

We had to decide the plot of the film we were going to make. Nowadays it would be called a Story Conference. Now, of course, the whole world would hold its breath while a dozen famous men wandered wearily, like tethered goats, around and around the same old close-nibbled circle of exhausted pasture. "Hush! They are in a Story Conference!" the Secretaries would whisper, tiptoeing over the deep-piled carpets of the outer offices. And we should sit, clutching our foreheads or furtively picking our noses, in a swirling cloud of aromatic smoke worth sixpence a puff; one of us frowning at the ceiling, another scowling at the floor, yet another drawing female buttocks on a blotting-pad; until, having got back to where we started, we should all go home to chew the old, old used-up cud of a regurgitated plot.

Ah, but in the old days, at least, we had a little fun. The

business was young, and so were we. There was a smell of adventure in the air: nobody knew what was going to happen next. It was California or bust—Park Lane or Carey Street! We made things up as we went along, always in a diabolical hurry, side-stepping opposition and hooking back at it as we swerved like cunning but carefree young fighting-bulls. Films were new and exciting, then. We have become telegraphists, who once were riders of the Pony Express. Everything has changed—people, dogs, pictures—nothing is as bright as it used to be. Yes, yes, I am maudlin, I know—a man of a dying generation, full of senile nostalgia. All right, let it be like that.

Only yesterday I saw a young apprentice loitering about the countless acres of the Studios, picking up the business. No doubt he is the son of somebody who has a friend who knows somebody somewhere. When I saw him I wanted to weep. He was all dressed up for film-work. As God is my judge, he was wearing brand-new corduroy trousers and brand-new suede shoes; a brand-new tartan shirt open at the neck, and, instead of a tie, a brand-new Paisley scarf. His jacket was of ruddy tweed, brand-new. On the elbows and cuffs there were sewn brand-new patches of shiny leather. How sweet! Thus, when the gentleman-warriors were seen with disordered ruffles after Steenkirk, the fops of London took to wearing their ruffles in exquisite disorder.

Dirk van Dyk used to wear leather on his elbows. But that was because he was a frugal man who never gave away a coat until it was unfit even for a tramp to wear. He also wore a scarf instead of a necktie when at work, just as stokers wear sweat-rags—he wiped his face with it. Van Dyk perspired out of every pore in our oven-like old studio. If he worked in a coloured shirt it was because he begrudged good money spent on laundry-bills. As for suede shoes, he would have thrown them in your face with a hideous imprecation . . . “Am I a fancy-boy?” He would have sneered at corduroy trousers, and said: “Am I a street-mender?”

And I? Am I laughing at the newcomers? God forgive

me—who am I? I always wanted to help the weak.

Once, long ago, I was awakened in the dead of night by the screaming of a woman who was being savagely beaten a few streets away. I wanted to rush out and help her; but the night was black and I was a stranger in the city. Soon the screaming stopped, and I could hear nothing but the thudding of my heart. I knew that the neighbours slept, protected by the policeman who paced his beat. But I knew that somebody near me was in pain, sobbing quietly under the discreet cover of the dark.

There are times when I feel the same sort of impotent pity as I felt that night—a similarly sick, angry grief.

But now I live in a sound-proof flat.

## 5

Poor old Daumier's studios were being cleaned and repaired, and so business was transacted in Chinchilla's home for the time being. He had rented a furnished house near Marble Arch. It might have been an annexe of the British Museum. The lumber of half a dozen civilisations lay mouldering there, while moths ate up stuffed trophies out of all the jungles in the world. Chinchilla's temporary office was the Study: it was hung with mounted heads of strange beasts. I counted three African buffaloes, one Kodiak bear, a warthog, five different sorts of wild pig, eleven little antelopes which all looked alike, part of a giraffe, a twelve-point Barasingh, and fifteen or sixteen other horned creatures the existence of which I had never suspected. A yataganerie of barbarous weapons filled the wall over the fireplace, and the mantel-shelf supported a great glass case of geological specimens. There were three human skulls on the desk—Caucasian, Hamitic, and Negroid—together with an unborn gorilla in a jar of greenish spirit, several specimens of curious hardwood, and a palæolithic flint axe.

We discussed our first picture in this room.

Dirk van Dyk was wandering about, poking at stuffed heads and muttering under his breath. I loved Dirk. Chinchilla said that he was a Saint wrapped up in the hide of a bullock. Imagine a mighty, snorting, low-browed Netherlander, who appeared to trample things underfoot as he walked, and talked in a long-drawn-out bellow, staring straight in front of him with bloodshot brown eyes. Dirk van Dyk was one of those sweet-natured grumblers who love to assume brutal attitudes; who growl curses when they mean blessings, and threaten organ-grinders with clenched fistfuls of silver. In fifteen years I never heard him say a kind word to anyone about anything, yet everybody liked him. Even Chinchilla admired him. Van Dyk was a cameraman, one of the greatest of them all. But who will remember him? Nothing will remain of his work, except a few scratched strips of perforated celluloid in a shallow tin can on a dusty shelf in Wardour Street. We are nothing but purveyors of shadows.

I can see him now, prowling up and down, pausing to frown up at a stuffed springbok-head and belching out short, explosive puffs of acrid cigar-smoke, while the rest of us sit in earnest debate.

The Director Kuragin was there—a hair-tearer and megaphone-bender of the old school, newly-arrived from Paris—twenty-two years old yet portentous and awful-looking as a hanging judge, with a face like a sucking pig in spectacles, and tiny puffy eyes in which there had already begun to gleam the first cold light of that megalomania which was to lead him at last into a sanatorium, where he sits to this day accusing the Lord God Almighty of jealousy and threatening to walk out on Him. At dawn he bellows: "Lights!" At dusk he shouts: "Cut!" In the spring he commands the trees to bud and tells the daffodils to get a move on: if they are late he screams at them: "I warn you! For the last time! I shall scrap the whole thing! Ah, why must I always work alone—I, Kuragin!" Then he weeps. Recently he tore up a rhododendron-bush for leaning the wrong way against a cloud.

Yet he was a first-rate Director in the beginning.

Salina Eferwesser was there too, looking absurdly young in her inexpensive fur coat. She was about twenty-one, then. Chinchilla changed her name to Lola Pearl: he had discovered her in Switzerland, playing in an amateur production of *The Lady of the Camellias*. She ran away from home to join us. We did not know that she was married to a bristle-merchant and had a baby daughter, until after the release of her first picture, when a harassed little man with a wispy ginger moustache came and implored her to go back home, where her little Mina was crying for her. There was a scene. She didn't accompany him back to Berne. Chinchilla had a long talk with him, and Monsieur Eferwesser returned alone, feeling like a selfish beast, and so faded out of her life. She had a wonderfully spiritual face, full of wistful sweetness. Men wanted to comfort and protect her: she was the Little Woman of the universe. She had a tremendous vogue and exercised a formidable influence at the height of her popularity. Big, healthy wenches made themselves round-shouldered, and puckered up their mouths, and sucked their fingers, in imitation of Lola Pearl. One girl died of blood-poisoning after poking herself in the cheek with a skewer to make a Lola Pearl Dimple. Thirty thousand mothers named their daughters after Lola. Headmistresses led straw-hatted crocodiles of tittering little freckled girls to see the Lola Pearl pictures, so that they might profit by her example and grow up to be self-sacrificing and cheerful. Chinchilla knew how to pick them—he was always right.

Crowthers Sexton was with us that day—a serious-minded young actor of the passionate, fiery kind, whose ardent and tender glance turned the average woman into a sort of quivering pink blanc-mange. Yet he was a friendly, sensible young man, despite his good looks. I liked him because in everyday life he behaved like a normal human being, which is more than one can say of most actors.

It is hard for an actor to be normally honest and intelligent. He lives, from hour to hour, for the applause of dull-

witted, uncritical crowds. If he were intelligent he'd know this. If he knew this he couldn't take himself seriously; in which case he'd never be an actor. Besides, what kind of a man is he who spends all his formative years looking in a mirror and pulling faces? Gammon Watkins once said to me: "I'd make every would-be actor learn an honest trade before appearing professionally on the stage." But he was a man of cynical mind, "an emergency-job of case-hardening," as he used to say. He was referring to the rough-and-ready method employed by mechanics when they want to harden the surface of a piece of iron: they simply make the iron red-hot and plunge it into a can of urine.

He had been immersed in theatrical publicity for the past twelve years. Gammon Watkins, an old newspaperman, knew everybody and everything. He had come to work for Chinchilla as Publicity Agent. There was precious stuff buried in that man; but somewhere in his soul a prop had snapped and a shaft had collapsed; dark water had poured in, and the vein of gold was buried for ever. There he was—a talented man with a clear brain, good instincts, good taste, wide experience, and shrewd wit—and he had lost his faith in God and Man. You could read all this in his pale, dilapidated, ageing face, coarse-textured as heavy canvas and falling into saturnine folds between nostrils and mouth. He had a thirst like a damned soul, and the devil's own impudence. Although he seemed old to me, then, he could not have been more than forty. All the same, there is nothing like world-weariness for putting years on a man.

We had been talking of the possibility of making a film of the play called *Love and Lust*, a sentimental drama of seduction and betrayal which was wringing the heart of London. After each performance women were seen crying their eyes out in the vestibule of the theatre. *Love and Lust* had a strong plot, said Chinchilla, and it was just the thing for Lola Pearl.

"Have you seen the play, Gammon?" he asked.

Gammon Watkins let out a short laugh. "I saw the

play," he said. "Pathos? It inspired such a deluge of phlegm that not more than one word in three could be heard. You're right: it's what they want. Good idea. Fine part for Miss Pearl, the part of poor little Tina. That scene where she looks up at the Madonna and Child and bursts into tears and faints and falls downstairs. . . . Mm-hum! It can't miss. And fortunately, as a film, there won't be any talking. Have you been to the theatre? the noise is something terrible, especially where little Tina says that bit about 'we poor women betrayed by love'."

Then Gammon Watkins, with astonishingly clever mimicry, reproduced the noises:—

"As she said the words 'betrayed by love', all the noses in the house went:

Tch-tch! Pultch-pultch!  
Tchooptch-plupp!  
Plupch, honk-honk-honk!

"And then the Throats joined in:—

Khuk-khuk-khulch!  
Erhook, wehook, berhook!  
Ahum, ber-hump, ach-hump!

"The Chests picked it up like this:—

Bra-hoo, bra-hoo!  
Ta-herk, ta-herk!  
Aboo-broo-brahoo!  
Oh . . . ah!

"And as an accompaniment, the Backsides on the springs of the seats:—

Oink! Oink!  
Ing! Zing!  
Eeck! Yeenk!

"Everybody was writhing in ecstasy. Not a single sentence was audible from the stage, I give you my word."

Two days later Gammon Watkins told us that an American Producer named Shatz had bought the play. Chinchilla shrugged a disdainful shoulder and said:—

"It does not matter a good God Damn. *Love and Lust!* Who wants it? Who cares about it? Edgar will think up something along the same lines, only much better. What about an artist who goes blind? Oh my God! If only I could find a comedian, a pantomimist, somebody like Charlie Chaplin who can wet your trousers with laughter and your eyelashes with pathos."

I thought fast and improvised a plot, a story about a little blind girl who sings, and is in love with a violinist who is in danger of losing his left arm.

Lola Pearl burst into tears on the spot, and even Chinchilla was not unmoved. He said: "Bring in, if possible, somebody who is old and sweet—somebody's mother, somebody's father, somebody's old nurse—what the devil! And there should be a villain, a dirty dog, who wants to seduce Lola. She is blind, and cannot see what a repulsive creature he is; yes? And what about this—the violinist has an opportunity of playing a concerto and thus making a lot of money. He wants the money because, by means of an expensive operation, the blind girl's sight may be restored. What happens then? There is no end to the permutations and combinations of such a plot. *Love and Lust!* Bah to *Love and Lust!* This is better. The violinist is warned that if he plays this concerto he will probably lose the use of his left arm. Eh? But what is he to do? He loves his blind girl, does he not? By Heavens, if this were done properly it might give people a nervous breakdown. But it ends happily, of course; the violinist gets his arm back, the girl gets her eyes back, and they get married. I admit that it is vaguely reminiscent of Victor Hugo. Let us forget that. There are only thirteen different plots in the world, and



seven of these are about blind singers and crippled violinists. Edgar, get to work! Let us have this story complete in twenty-four hours."

I said that it would be difficult to complete all the details in so short a space of time, but Chinchilla cried: "To Hell with the details! We will make them up as we go along."

And so we began with the picture called *Song of Sorrow*, which made a profit of one hundred thousand pounds. Chinchilla was never wrong. He had a water-diviner's knack of discovering the well-springs of the world's tears. Our first three pictures were all sad. All the girls cried bitterly and went away saying, between sobs, that they had not had such a good time for years. Our second production was about two sisters with all the world against them. Lola played the part of the elder sister, and the other little girl was a child discovery named Bunny Cuddles. Nobody ever believed it, but this was her real name; she was the child of a stage-struck mother who for the next twenty years never let her out of her sight. Bunny, at the age of ten, was a precocious little girl with corkscrew curls. Small boys fell in love with her, mothers wanted to adopt her, old gentlemen desired to caress her. She made a tremendous fortune, and achieved world-wide celebrity before her fourteenth birthday. Then she grew plump, and the chubbiness of irresistible childhood turned into a kind of gawky doughiness. She and her mother fought each other in a protracted law-suit. Bunny Cuddles said that the old lady had swindled her out of two-thirds of her earnings, and Mrs. Cuddles struggled like a wild cat in a bag. The daughter won, went to Hollywood, failed miserably, married a boxer, divorced him, married a director, divorced him, and when last heard of was working in one of the best clubs in Chicago. The journalist who interviewed her told me that she smelled strongly of rye whisky, and was going to marry a farmer because she wanted to get away from it all.

But I seem to be digressing.

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

I swear, before God, that at this period Chinchilla had only to wish for something. If he had a fancy for some kind of unheard-of exotic food it appeared on his table. If he needed a hundred thousand pounds, he found it. He was perpetually murmuring of the dearth of good comedians—comedians with a screen technique. After our third picture he said: "Now, I really must find a funny man, for the time has come for comedy."

So we walked out into the street, and Chinchilla found a comedian.

We used to go for walks together then. One autumn evening we strolled into Hyde Park, and heard a great rumble of laughter. One of the largest of the crowds was gathered about a platform over which fluttered a little blue banner upon which, crudely painted in white appeared the words: *Think twice*.

On the platform an old man who had just finished a speech was introducing a queer-looking creature with a bald head and a lugubrious face. The old man pointed. The bald man bowed. It was a funny bow, God knows why: everything that man did was funny. He could make you fall into screaming hysterics by scratching his head. I give you my word of honour that he could make low comedy in the act of falling dead. I do not know how people do this: it is something beyond definition, like the art of diagnostics, or any other individual intuitive accomplishment. The bald man needed only to nod his head, to send everybody into a mood of hilarious expectation. He was a small, nondescript figure with the features of the man in the street, and ordinary shabby-genteel clothes. I have studied his face from every angle and have never found it other than commonplace. The old man, however, had an air of dignity and cheerfulness. He stood motionless, looking at the sky over the heads of the crowd—a sweet-faced old man with clean pink skin, long white hair, and a moustache that made him look not unlike Lloyd George. Somebody in the crowd shouted: "Good old Tabernacle Jones!"

Chinchilla asked a man standing next to him what it was all about. The man replied: "Tabernacle Jones. A scream."

"What does he do?"

"Preacher."

Then Tabernacle Jones opened his mouth and let out a resonant, bell-like laugh, and said:—

"Yes, my friends, it is easy enough to live from hand to mouth and from minute to minute thinking only of the first thing that comes into your head and not seeing beyond the tip of your nose. Ah yes, it is only human, and we all do it. But what is the use of it all—what is the use of living if you forget what you are living for? What is the use if you forget the reason why you are doing what you do? Where will it get you? With all the care and caution in the world you might as well lay down and die if you forget the essentials. Mightn't you? And what is life? A preparation. Just as pyjamas are given you to go to bed in, so your body is given to you to go to God in. And what would be the use of a fine suit of silk pyjamas if you did not have the price of a bed and had to sleep under a hay-stack in the rain? Would you spend your bed money on a pair of bedroom slippers? Think twice, think twice, my friends!"

His hand was on the shoulder of the hairless one who responded like the needle of a volt-meter to every vibration of his voice and pressure of his fingers. As the old man cried "think twice" and emphasised the words with a blow of his fist upon the platform, that strange bald creature swung away sideways, seemed to hang suspended over the wet asphalt at an impossible angle, and then swung back again bolt upright and instantly became motionless. And this, somehow, was funny. The crowd laughed and the old man laughed too. But then, commanding silence with an urgent gesture, he said:—

"Patience, all in good time. Oh dear me, what babies you are! You don't care about what I say, do you?"

Two or three voices cried: "No," and several others shouted: "Let him finish," "Shut up," and so on.

The old man continued: "No, you don't want to hear the truth—not you. You great babies, I don't know why I take the trouble to come and give you the Word of God at all hours of the day and in all weathers, when all you care about is seeing poor little Jimbo doing his tricks." At this the bald man bowed, or rather folded himself in two, like a sheet of paper. "Well, well, if one or two of you, or only one of you, comes to laugh and stays to pray, as the poet says, my time isn't wasted and my Master's business is getting done. Why, there was a man who followed me all over the country just for the sake of laughing at poor Jimbo, and after six months of it he came to me very seriously, thank God, and shook me by the hand and said: 'Bless you, Mr. Tabernacle Jones, and bless Jimbo too, because between you, you have made me see the Light.' Well, well, I won't disappoint you. Now then Jimbo, show them that I mean what I say they ought to think twice."

Then Jimbo hopped down, bouncing like a golf ball and the crowd raised a great cheer and began to laugh in anticipation. Even the policemen started to chuckle over their chin-straps. Three hundred grinning mouths steamed and sizzled like kettles in the cool evening air. "*Think twice!*" roared the old man. "Now Jimbo will show you what happened to the fine lady who paid so much attention to her beautiful face that she couldn't think of the thing she had really set out to do."

He made a sign, and then I saw one of the most wonderful pieces of dumb show I have ever had the pleasure of witnessing. Dear God, the things that clown did with himself! He became in an instant a comic caricature of a vain and beautiful woman. He draped a raincoat around him so that the raincoat became a feathered penguin. The imaginary feathers tickled his nose; he went through the motions—wonderfully exact in every detail of expression—of a lady-like sneeze, and smoothed them away with a coy finger. He seated himself upon an imaginary chair in front of an invisible dressing-table with three mirrors, and with

finickerty, fussy delicacy adjusted several rows of brushes and combs and cosmetic boxes that weren't there. Admiring himself from every angle, he crossed his legs, and went to work on his eyebrows. He plucked the left eyebrow, and then he plucked the right; and then he discovered that there was one hair too many on the left hand side, and went back to it with the meticulousity of a surgeon: but the shape of it was changed, and so he had to readjust the other one. This went on until he burst into tears, throwing himself forward with his head on the dressing-table, and sobbing so that his raincoat flapped and fluttered like a shaken carpet. Of course, this smeared his eyelids, and he had to get to work again. A wisp of hair had come loose. He had to twiddle it back into position before making up his mouth, which he proceeded to do with a thousand ridiculous gestures. And now he produced the only piece of real property in the performance—a fantastically shabby old felt hat, which he handled like ancient porcelain and put upon his grotesque bald head with the breathless trepidation of a spoiled beauty with an elaborate coiffure. Believe me or believe me not, Jimbo, with two twists of his Javanese-dancer's boneless hands, turned that ragged and dusty relic into an exclusive, sensational creation out of Paris. Looking at himself, then, and caressing his face with adoring fingers, he knew he was beautiful. He stood up, and let the raincoat fall to the ground. He couldn't take his eyes off his face. Having turned to walk away he was compelled to go back and have another look at himself and touch his hat and smile at himself. Then he picked up an imaginary fan, opened an imaginary door and swept graciously down an imaginary staircase. He conveyed somehow, that an admirer was waiting for him. You never saw anything like the condescension with which he offered a lily-white hand, covered with non-existent jewels. All this was great, but the climax was a masterpiece. In a tenth of a second he changed. He became a ludicrous, pitiful figure of shame and humiliation. He dropped his fan, tried to cover himself with his hand like the girl in

"September Morn", and ran blindly away. The fine lady, preoccupied with her hat and her eyebrows, had forgotten to put her clothes on.

We were laughing ourselves sick. But Jimbo, snapping up out of one of his crazy bows, suddenly became compellingly serious as he raised a rubbery arm—which, incidentally, appeared to stretch itself until it doubled its length and pointed at the old man who, also raising an arm, but pointing upwards, cried:—

"Yes! You must think of yourself as a whole, and not only of the appearance of part of you. Think twice, and think carefully if you want to be saved from shame and sorrow in the end! Your body is only a silly dress which your soul puts on to go to a party. It will soon grow shabby and wear out. Think twice, think twice! There are people among us now who are well dressed on the outside, but whose underclothes and whose bodies are filthy, and who would be ashamed if suddenly they were to be seen as what they really are. Some women say to their daughters: 'Take care to wear clean linen—say you were to be knocked down while crossing the road; what would they think of you in the hospital?' And I am saying to you: wear clean souls because sooner or later you will be knocked down on life's highway—and what will God think of you? Aye, yes, we must all be stripped of our bodies when we go to Judgement. Now let us pray—Our Father . . ."

I was aware of a terrible pain in my right shoulder. Chinchilla was gripping it, and his eyes were glittering. He said nothing to me, but as soon as the prayer was ended he smashed his way through the crowd, dragging me after him, and stopped Tabernacle Jones and Jimbo as they were making their way out of the Park. Jimbo was carrying the platform. Chinchilla said: "Mr. Jones, my name is Chinchilla, and I have been deeply moved by what I have seen and heard tonight. I believe that I may be of some assistance to you. You must be hungry and tired. My friend and I would be greatly honoured if you would give us your company at dinner."

The old man began to stammer something. But Chinchilla had him and Jimbo in a taxi before they had time to get their breath.

This was the beginning of the career of The Great Jimbo.

. . . . .

Tabernacle Jones told us that he had been an idler and a sinner for fifty-five years, living upon a small inherited income and languidly yawning away the days in a small West Country town. But one night when the earth was white with frost and the sky bright with stars he looked upwards and saw God. Something fell away from his eyes, and a pure light shone. Something like a stopper was plucked out of his head with a wrench and a pop, and he heard music. He went home and prayed all night. Early next morning he went out to preach the Word, and took Jimbo with him. Jimbo's father had been an artilleryman. His mother was a servant-girl.

The neighbours would not leave her alone; she ran away, leaving her baby with a sister, and took a headlong dive into the depths of Cardiff, where she disappeared for ever. Jimbo's aunt died. The children of the little town called him a bastard. The local orphanage beat hell out of him. He ran away: Tabernacle Jones found him shivering in the rain and took him in. "It was twenty years ago," the old man said, "and Jimbo is like a son to me. I should be lost without him."

"My dear sir!" said Chinchilla, looking at him with affection, "you shall not be parted from him, ever!"

"You're a kind-hearted gentleman," said Tabernacle Jones, gazing straight into Chinchilla's eyes, "and I trust you. Yes, I do. I trust you because I can see that there is love in your heart, and that you're honourable and just and merciful. But . . . if Jimbo went on the picture-halls, who'd help me to spread the Word? Because I'm only a silly old man, and they only listen to me because of Jimbo. Eh, Jimbo, my son? Isn't it better to spread the Word?"

In his odd, retching, husky voice Jimbo replied: "Yes,

Dad," and jerked his glabrous head up and down in a nod which was worth eight hundred and fifty words.

"Yet," said Chinchilla, "with my help—in due course—you can spread the Word to a thousand million people. Have you seen Charlie Chaplin?"

"A great man!" cried Tabernacle Jones, smiling. "A fine, good man. And always in those torn clothes however successful he is! *Blessed are the poor in spirit*. God bless him!"

"I can make Jimbo as famous as Chaplin," said Chinchilla. "The whole world will hang on his slightest gesture within two years, three years—a little while. Let him come to me. Stay with him if you like——"

With one twitch of one eyebrow Jimbo said to Tabernacle Jones: *Unless you stay with me I shall not go*. The old man smiled at him and said: "Thank you, my son, for that. God bless you for your good, loyal heart!"

"—Stay with him," said Chinchilla. "Later, when the whole world knows him as a comedian, and loves him as such (the whole world loves a comedian), why, then we can make him our Field Marshal in a Holy War. Think of the force that is being wasted in parks and on street corners!"

"What do you say, my son?" asked the old man.

"What do *you* say?" replied Jimbo: but his eyes flickered.

Meditatively counting his fingers Tabernacle Jones muttered: "All told, in seven years . . . we have brought more than twenty sinners out of the mire . . . twenty-three . . . twenty-eight, nearly. There was a very wretched man who did things—you won't have heard of such things, sir—to children. Jimbo and I made him think twice, and now——"

"—And I tell you that in four years you may bring more than twenty-eight thousand sinners out of the mire," said Chinchilla. "And as for money——"

"Jimbo and I don't need money," said Tabernacle Jones. "Eh, Jimbo?"

"No, Dad," said Jimbo.



"It can be given away, or thrown away, or burnt," said Chinchilla, smiling.

But Jones was thinking, holding his fine old head in his sunburned hands. After a minute or two he looked directly at me, and said: "Sir, tell me: are you a good man too?"

I answered: "No, not particularly. I wish I were a good man."

"Oh, but you're kind and truthful?"

"I try to speak the truth."

"Do you mind if I look at you?"

"Please do," I said, "if you want to."

Tabernacle Jones dragged his chair closer to me, and blinked at me. Then his gaze became steady. I held it: I liked his eyes. A few seconds passed, very slowly.

"Yes," he said, "you are pure in heart."

Jimbo was feeling the brocade of his chair, and his face was blank.

"It is kind of you to say so."

"No, you are pure and good," said Tabernacle Jones.

"I want your word. The other gentleman is good too, or that's what I believe. But who am I to know things and judge? A worm. Tell me, is it as Mr. Chinchilla says?"

I said: "It is exactly as he says."

"Thank God," said Tabernacle Jones, smiling. "I can see that you mean it in your heart."

"Well?" asked Chinchilla.

"Do what you say," said the old man, holding out his right hand to him and his left to Jimbo. After a hard, brief shake—I never saw a stranger group—he disengaged his right hand and offered it to me, saying: "Forgive me, brother: I have only one pair of hands to embrace people with."

There was a silence. Then he said: "Shall we seek the Lord Jesus in prayer?"

His knees and Jimbo's hit the carpet in one thud. Chinchilla knelt after them: I was half a second behind him. But there was no word spoken; nothing but silence for

several minutes, and then Tabernacle Jones arose and said: "I felt the beating of great wings."

Next day we drew up a contract.

. . . . .

I meant what I said to Tabernacle Jones—with all my heart I meant it.

Ah, you can take the son out of his mother, but you can never take the mother out of her son! My mother's conscience was enslaved by her affection as a lonely moth is enslaved by a bright light. I resemble her in that. And I remember seeing, in our own home, a cracked alabaster bowl in which an electric light had once burned: it was grey in the daylight, and full of dead moths.

There may also be men who, when their lights are darkened, will have acquired nothing but the dried-up shells of silly insects.

Oh Lord, I know that loyalty is a virtue.

But I know a man who said: "I will stick to my friend whatever happens." He was trying to sound noble; yet he stuck to his friend as a damp shirt sticks to a body—because without something to stick to he would have been a crumpled cold thing with no shape at all.

Yet I have always meant what I said.

Did I always know what I meant, though?

An American journalist described me, once, as "A sucker for any New Messiah." This is not true. Nevertheless, I have always been a thrower-down of nets and a follower; a born Disciple.

Chinchilla won my heart: therefore I believed in him. It is a fact that he was destined to be a Film Magnate. But when I first met him he was nothing. If he had happened to be a journeyman carpenter I should have considered his appearance as an Advent.

I loved the man, and was faithful to him.

. . . . .

Yet Dirk van Dyk distrusted him. "I take a Rationalist view of Valter Chinchilla," he said. "Chinchilla's origins are not Divine. Look oudt!"

*Song of Sorrow* was just finished, and we had been drinking some whisky at all kinds of bars between the Criterion and Romano's. Out in the roaring, glaring Strand he said to me: "Look oudt, Prem; you are getting diseased vid your Chinchilla."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"You have caught a bad attack of Chinchilla," said Dirk van Dyk. Seeing that I was angry, he made fumbling gestures and inclined his ponderous head to one side. "No, no, no—not like that! Boy, boy, boy! You believe me. Chinchilla could bringk you trouble. Look now—you *eat* Chinchilla, *drink* Chinchilla, *dream* Chinchilla. You are *talkingk* Chinchilla for two hours. You are drungk vid Chinchilla. You got to have a Chinchilla before you start der day. You look oudt!"

"Don't be a fool," I said. "I know Chinchilla."

"*Vot* you know, then?"

While I hesitated, van Dyk growled: "Boy, I like you. I say . . ." He groped in space, as if the night were full of lost words. "Oh, go to the Devil if you vant to. But I like you, and so I say . . . he is not goodt for your soul. Chinchilla! He is nice, yes; fascinatingk, sure; on a big scale, you bet you your life! He knows trigks, but he is a person *nodt* to fall in love vid—Chinchilla is a whore!"

"Good-night," I said.

"Vaidt! If I have hurdt you, forgive me."

"You've simply been foolish. The whisky talks, not you, van Dyk. If you mean what you've just said, why have you signed a contract to work for him?"

This seemed to touch him on a tender spot. He stammered and growled, hesitated, and at last replied: "So, so, so. I sign contracts to vork five years vid Chinchilla. (Ouf! —to have vords!) It is because Chinchilla vill do Big Tings."

"Ah-ah, you admit that?"

Van Dyk seemed to wallow and spout like a stricken whale on the corner of Southampton Street. "Yes, yes, yes, I admit, I admit! But—for *himself*, Chinchilla is vot? Money. No more. To use, yes. To love? No!" Dirk van Dyk calmed himself. "He is nottink, only a Business Maker. He is Money, boy—vot else comes from Chinchilla is a by-product. Vid him der strong ting is Money."

I answered: "What is wrong with by-products? Mathematics are a by-product of Astrology. Chemistry, that noble and useful science, is a by-product of the wild speculations of the Alchemists who hoped to transmute base metals into gold."

"So? So? So?" shouted van Dyk. "And vot vas lost ven men scraped and scraped der bottom of dem meltingk-pots, loogkingk for gold? You look oudt vot you chuck away if all you loogk for is gold!"

"You're drunk, Dirk," I said. And so he was.

"I am drungk," he admitted, with such humility that I wanted to embrace him. But he added: "And so are you. You look oudt! Chinchilla? Poof!"

"My friend Chinchilla and I happen to have ideals in common," I said.

"Ideals? Poetry, fairy-tales! He vill only be a schwollen-head millionaire!"

"You're glad enough to work for him, though."

"I vork for der vork," said Dirk van Dyk, with unexpected arrogance.

"At a price," I said.

"Yes," said van Dyk, "if I can gedt a price, I take it. But I vork, boy. I *make* sometings."

I said: "I have been very rude, Dirk; please pardon me."

"Vot? Oh Kerist, boy; forgedt it! I buy a dringk." He seemed to finger invisible cloth. "Boy, find a voman—some good fool so she believes in you like God. Because you got a good heart."

He was getting into the philosophic stage of drunkenness. "What has my heart to do with it?" I asked, simply for the sake of talking.

"Eh? Eh? Because if you got a voman, and so she wants for somethink good out of you, den you couldn't give her a disappointment. Like a cat's eyes in der dark, boy, she would get *der* light out of you. Vid a voman, you'd be a calm man. Vid Chinchilla you are a lay figure, a dummy!"

"Dirk," I said, "Chinchilla and I are friends. We work together."

"Boy," growled Dirk van Dyk, "Chinchilla is *not* to vork togedder vid. Chinchilla is climbing up a blutty flag-pole. Kerist sake, boy—keep laughink, keep a sense of hayoomer! Chinchilla is a man simply, not a Gott. Dere ain't no Gott. Find a nice voman."

I became irrationally irritated. "Good-night," I said.

Van Dyk held me by the elbow and begged my pardon, which I granted with a bow. Then I excused myself. "I have not fed the dog," I said, and walked back to Cenci's, feeling low-spirited and restless.

. . . . .

Gurth was about six months old now. Chinchilla was right, I did need a dog, but Gurth was a fool and a buffoon, and the woman in the shop was a bare-faced liar when she said that he was a bull-terrier of good pedigree. Some mastiff blood had got into the family somewhere, and God knows what else besides. He was beginning to develop a hideous aspect and an unwieldly size, lop-ears, oafish feet, and a tail like a whip-lash—it almost cracked when he wagged it. Ted, the chauffeur, was deeply interested in him and wanted to bite his tail off so as to give the dog a smart, sportsman-like air. I would not let him do this and so the tail went on growing and growing: Gurth carried it with a gawky, self-conscious air, like a boy with his first walking-stick. I never knew a slower-witted animal. He had no sense of self-preservation, and refused to learn the most simple and fundamental things. I had to teach him even how to urinate like a proper dog. At night I would take him into the back garden when I was sure that nobody was watching me and run around on all fours,

delicately raising my right leg against the trunk of a little plane tree. Once a policeman saw me and I was involved in a long, unconvincing explanation. But Gurth loved me with a fierce, jealous love. He amused Chinchilla very much.

We used to sit and watch him. With infinite sensitivity he would investigate every inch of the garden, sniffing here and there like a tea-taster. He seemed to be on the trail of something illusive, rare and beautiful. His nose quivered, he moved faster, paused, looking strangely noble in the centre of the lawn; examined the grass, picked out one blade, scrutinised it, sniffed at it, and walked away regretfully but purposefully to the terrace. His eyes gleamed as they scanned every pore in each scoured brick. Then he looked up to heaven. His quest was ended. He had found a certain spot in the centre of the top step. And then he made a filthy mess on it.

"Call him *The Critic*," said Chinchilla.

I replied: "I don't know, I really don't. For example, if you send him running after a ball he starts with an enthusiastic rush, but is side-tracked by any twig and stops to gnaw it, so that he forgets what he went out to get and comes back with nothing looking idiotically proud of himself and at the same time melancholy. I think I shall call him *The Philosopher*. Or again, he barks at smaller dogs and sniffs at the bottoms of bigger dogs. Sometimes he pretends to assert himself with a little insincere growl. He can't bear to be ignored; he must be perpetually stroked, soothed, flattered, and tickled. He loves about all things the aroma of his own backside. I might even call him *The Actor*."

He was a difficult dog to understand—pointlessly destructive and crazily paradoxical. Rather than nourish himself on the good food I gave him, he preferred to eat carpets and curtains, which made him sick. Yet he was passionately fond of other dogs' food plates. When called he ran away; when something frightened him he would sneak back. He was hopelessly dependent upon everybody

for everything; never barked twice on the same note yet never changed his theme except from a threat to a whimper and back again; never seemed to know where he was going; made life unendurable by his yapping insistence on the demands of his belly and his milk teat. It was almost impossible to believe that he could ever grow up. He was almost exactly like a human adolescent.

And, as a father loves a difficult child, so I came to love Gurth, without knowing or caring why I loved him. I never had the heart to punish him. Soon he came to regard an angry note in my voice as a punishment in itself, and would lie at my feet gazing up at me with his large melancholy dark eyes. Altogether he must have cost me hundreds of pounds. There was fighting blood in him—some of the blood of the terrible pit-fighting Staffordshire Bull, which fights only to kill, and kills or dies in silence. In battle, this sloppy, dribbling, easy-going animal became deadly. On one occasion I had to pay fifty pounds for a prize Alsatian which Gurth killed in Hyde Park. I believe that Ted, who was taking him for a walk, egged him on. He was apologetic, but there was a quiet glint of satisfaction in his eye and an excited ring in his voice as he said: "The Alsatian rushes in slashing like a wolf, and he rips old Gurth along the muzzle. See? But Gurth waits for him, see? The German dog has another go. See? But this time old Gurth gets him by the neck. See? And before you could say knife the Jerry was deader than Queen Anne."

Gurth never mated. Ted said that he wouldn't look at a bitch that wasn't a thoroughbred of his own kind—a contradiction in terms. It was a pity, he said, because he would have liked to have a pup of Gurth's. But Gurth begot no pups.

And I begot no children.

There is a rumour that I am impotent, or a homosexual, or even chaste, because my name has never been coupled with that of any woman. Lies. I never was much of a runner after petticoats. I lost my purity in the usual way, seduced by a lascivious servant girl with blonde hair,

innocent blue eyes, and a demure smile. I wonder where Teresa is now? She must be about eighty years old. It is not a pleasant thought.

Like everybody else I got involved in little love affairs with one or two girls, and was, I hope, generous to them, but I did not like any of them well enough to want to marry her or even to live with her for more than a week or so. Later, of course, hundreds and hundreds of women made advances—showed their legs, murmured proposals and even wrote me amorous notes—because they wanted to get on the screen. But that kind of barter has always repelled me. On the whole, when I was not working or talking with Chinchilla, I lived a lonely sort of life and grew used to it, got settled in my ways, and became a confirmed bachelor. I have never really fallen in love in my life, except once; and then of course I fell in love with Chinchilla's wife.

Did Chinchilla know? I have always wondered. It seemed to me that he could read my thoughts. One day, when I was thinking that it would be very pleasant to go to bed with Edda—it was late spring, and we had not known each other long—Chinchilla said, abruptly: "What do you think of my wife?"

I felt my face burning red like a neon tube and replied: "I think that Madame Chinchilla is a very fine woman."

"Edgar, be honest with me!"

"I am honest with you. I congratulate you on being married to such a remarkable woman."

"Edgar, look me in the face. Do not be disingenuous: be open. Tell me your honest opinion of Edda."

I was irritated by this, and said: "Why do you cross-examine me like this? Why?"

Chinchilla shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

She was an enigma, and I never knew what to make of her. Sometimes I saw her as deep, clever and dangerous; sometimes I would look at her and laugh at myself for wondering about her, because all of a sudden she would look like nothing but a large, lazy voluptuous slut. Some-



times, sitting near her, I would inhale her perfume and shiver with desire; and sometimes I would sniff sharply and decide that what she needed was a bath.

Her eyes were profound. Her conversation was stupid. Her smile was mysterious. The devil knows what she was. You would have thought that she could have been the last woman on earth for Chinchilla, who—again enigmatically—seemed at the same time to hate her and to treasure her. He looked at her as if he loathed the sight of her, and yet he did not let her out of his sight for long. She could not open her mouth without letting fall some inanity which raised blisters on Chinchilla's sensibilities and set his teeth on edge like the scraping of a knife against a plate. He used to curse her outrageously, and once, when she bought him a pair of bedroom slippers in the shape of orange-coloured rabbits he threw them at her. This made her scream with laughter: she did not take him seriously. Perhaps that was it! Perhaps he was determined to keep her with him until he had made some tremendous impression upon her and won her unqualified adoration. I never really knew.

Did he suspect that I had some guilty secret on my mind? Did he believe that I had reason to be ashamed of some little cheap adultery? He must have known that I would cut my right hand off rather than be so dishonorable. Damn it all; call me a stooge, a weakling, or anything you like and you may be right; but I am not dishonorable! I have clung to my code of honour as a shabby gentlewoman clings to her last decent dress, or as a fading actress clings to her last lover.

I thought, once, that Chinchilla was trying to test my loyalty, and was hurt at the thought. But I don't really know whether he was trying to test me or not. He left me alone one evening with Edda, and some very strange things happened. . . . Oh Lord, how tired I am!

. . . . .

Oh no, I am not likely to forget what happened that

evening in the preposterous flat which Edda had rented while Chinchilla was in Paris. What an extraordinary woman she was! She had an unerring instinct for the wrong colour in everything. She loved to mingle orange and bright green, vieux rose and electric blue, and preferred to wear all these colours in clothes that burst when she moved. Also, she had a passion for feathers. Edda's idea of dressing for a special occasion was, to put on indiscriminately everything she had. But at home she was happiest in a dressing-gown or a kimono. Chinchilla had taken her, almost by force, to some of the greatest *couturières* and chosen tasteful wardrobes for her; but it was quite useless, a waste of time and money. She obeyed Chinchilla literally in everything and yet, at the same time, she seemed to live her own life, sleek and contented as a warm, well-fed cat.

Chinchilla had to go and discuss business with a manufacturer of electrical apparatus. He told me to make myself at home, and left me sitting on the sofa with half a dozen illustrated magazines. At the very thought of it my throat dries up, and I feel I need a drink. . . .

. . . Yes, I have only to think of a crimson bath-robe, and it is as if a couple of carbons were touched off at the back of my head with a sputter and a fizz, projecting a great white light and a sharply-defined picture.

I am sitting there turning over the pages of *La Vie Parisienne*. I can hear Edda in the bathroom; she is washing her teeth and making hearty gargling-and-spitting noises. It seems that whenever she has a wash she is anxious to let the whole world know about it, and when she bathes, which is not as frequently as most English ladies do, what with her flat, toneless singing which resembles a moan of pain, and her gargantuan splashing, she sounds like a shipwreck. It is impossible for anybody in the vicinity to concentrate on anything while Edda Chinchilla is at her toilette, so I am compelled to listen. There is a smash as she drops a bottle into the basin. Although she moves with the light gracefulness of a dancer, she contrives

to smash more things and to knock over more furniture than anybody else in the world, so that the flat is always full of broken glass. Now, by the sound of it, she has just dropped the mouth-wash bottle. Much she cares. She starts to sing, all on one note—*la-la, la-la, la-la!* and comes out of the bathroom. The door opens behind me. She comes in, covers my eyes with her hands and says: "Guess who!"

I guess. She takes her hands away and laughs heartily, with her head thrown back, as if this is the funniest thing that ever happened.

Then she asks me what I am reading, and I reply that I am not reading but only looking at the pictures. Then, says Edda, she will look too—or do I mind? I make the only possible reply and she comes and sits beside me with her face close to mine. I hastily put down *La Vie Parisienne* and pick up *Punch*.

"Don't you like looking at pictures?" she says.

"Yes, I do," I reply.

She says: "So do I. I like rude pictures, don't you?"

I make a non-committal gesture. She continues: "Did you know Vanderdecken? He showed me some pictures once, and they were ever so rude. It was a scream!" She laughs again and moves a little closer. Her large, powerful body seems to vibrate. I can feel her prominent breasts against my shoulder and perceive a strong odour—a sort of jungle smell of highly receptive, expectant femininity. "Why, your hands are shaking," she says, and grasps them firmly. Her hands are very warm. She remarks that mine are cold. "Let me warm them for you," she whispers, and puts my right hand under her crimson bathrobe, which, apart from a pair of bright green slippers, is all she happens to be wearing. I, of course, am terrified out of my life, but at the same time, I am shaken from head to foot by awful spasms of desire for this dreadful woman. But I withdraw my hand from her bosom. She is the wife of my friend. Edda promptly puts my hand on her breasts again, and says: "Would you like to kiss me?"

I reply: "Madam, I cannot possibly. Your husband is my friend and I am in his house."

This amuses her no end: she laughs until her bathrobe falls wide open. I sit, paralysed, fascinated, like a hypnotised rabbit; I can't take my eyes off her.

"Don't I look terrible?" she asks. I shake my head: she is perfect, like that headless statue of Venus of which de Maupassant said: *With a body like that she doesn't need a head*. "Look—I have a little mole." She raises one of her magnificent legs, lays it across my knees and points to a brown speck small as a pin-head high up on the inside of the thigh: "Don't I look awful?"

She steers my hand towards it. I feel that my heart is jumping out of my throat, but I manage to stammer: "I'm—I'm a guest in your husband's house."

She replies: "See how strong I am," and grips my hand between her knees. It is like being caught in a bear-trap; I wrench it away with the utmost difficulty and it seems to me that it would be worth sacrificing friendship, honour, career and everything for the sake of ten minutes in this woman's embrace. Nevertheless I sit still. Edda has now exhausted all the subtleties, and is preparing for a more direct assault. She gets up with her bathrobe trailing behind her and sits astride my knees, looking into my eyes. "I *do* think you *are* handsome," she said, "would you rather I turned the light out?"

Striving like a soul in hell—which is exactly how I feel—I say: "No! No! Please do not torment me! I am a—a—a friend, a—a—a guest, a—a—a man of honour," and I add, on a lucky inspiration: "Your husband will be home at any moment."

She is not in the least disconcerted, but simply says: "Oh, will he really?" and gets off my knees, stretches herself like a great black-and-white animal and yawns. "Oh well, don't let's bother then." At that moment the outer door closes. Edda wraps herself up in the crimson bathrobe and, without hurry, saunters out of the room, pausing in the doorway to give me one of the sweetest

smiles that it is possible to imagine—a good, kind smile.

Then Chinchilla comes in. He looks at me keenly and says: "What is the matter? You look ill."

I mutter something about a headache, a backache, a cold; and he repeats: "Yes, you look really ill. You look feverish, you must go to bed with a hot whisky and some aspirin tablets." Then his nostrils twitch; he sniffs. He may well sniff: that diabolical woman has left her mating-season exhalations behind her. Chinchilla stands like a monolith. He turns his head slowly and stares at me. I say: "Yes, I'm going to bed." And so I go home and pitch and toss almost in a delirium until dawn, feeling that the best thing I can do is to blow my wretched brains out. Yet my conscience is clear, and my self-esteem by no means impaired.

All the same, God ought to forgive all my sins because of what I suffered on that sofa, that night!

I could not meet Chinchilla's eye for days, and I shunned Edda like the Black Death. Had it all been arranged as a trap? And did Chinchilla believe that I had fallen into it—that I of all men had failed to pass a test of loyalty? I never knew, and I never shall. I cannot believe that he ever really doubted me. Goodness knows, I have never given him any reason to doubt me. Yet . . .

What I need is another drink. That's what I need. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

So, Edda could hurt and perplex that armoured giant of a man. Chinchilla was a miracle-worker, a sorcerer, an ensnarer and a holder in thrall. Yet even he, like Koshchei the Deathless, had his Egg. You remember the story of Koshchei the Deathless? He was a wizard, and he could not be killed. In his golden castle he kept a captive Princess. She wheedled his dreadful secret out of him. Koshchei kept his Death locked up. There was a Secret Island in a Secret Ocean; on the Island grew an oak tree; under the oak tree was an iron chest; in the chest was a basket, in the basket was a hare, in the hare was a duck, and in

the belly of the duck was an egg. In this frail egg was contained the Death of Koshchei, so that whosoever broke the shell killed the Deathless One. The Princess told the Prince, and the Prince went away and found the Egg. When he squeezed it Koshchei shrieked with pain, and said to the smiling Princess: "It was because I loved you that I told you where my Death was!" But the Prince threw the egg to the floor, and the great one perished with a little sticky *plop*.

Destroy Chinchilla's belief in his own greatness, and you kill Chinchilla; his Egg was inside Edda's silly belly, and she didn't know it. Did Chinchilla know it? If he did, his pride kept that knowledge hidden from his consciousness. Pride, like a magic mist upon an enchanted sea, veils many dangerous islands from the eyes of men.

. . . . .

But none of us could afford to spend time and energy in pursuing small affairs of love or jealousy, in those feverish days. There was so much to be done, and I had so much to learn! I was full of romantic idealism then. Chinchilla said that I had been born before my time, and that I ought to have come into a utopian never-never-land of tomorrow, where everybody is clean and smells sweet. Too true, too true: I *was* born before my time. But not as a martyr, a genius, or a prophet; merely as a spiritual abortion.

Chinchilla, on the other hand, was born in his proper time. From birth to death, from a symphony to a slap in the face, the meaning of everything depends upon certain split seconds. Chinchilla was a master of perfect timing: in everything that he did he was a well-co-ordinated man, and therefore he could do ten times more work than a clumsy hesitant fool like me. He needed to be like this: we were living dangerously.

Chinchilla had the mountaineer's hankering after new heights; that hunger for remote peaks and icy summits inaccessible to ordinary man. He was no mere money-

maker: he loved to climb for the sake of climbing, cutting uncertain toe-holds in the slippery stone of the City, boldly hurling himself over chasms of debt and deficit to grasp the loose rock of a commercial gamble; clinging with bleeding fingers, hauling himself up with a gasp and struggling on from promontory to promontory while an avalanche of displaced boulders thundered down behind him; tottering on the edges of chasms where an unlucky wind, a false step, or a treacherous push would send him whirling out into emptiness to smash on the rocks below and lie for ever among the poor fragments of fallen things.

It was not easy; it was not done without strain. Something of the history of that climb may be seen to this day, marked on our faces. Chinchilla's lines are hard and straight like the ruled columns in a ledger. My face is lined too, but Time has scribbled it over with irrelevant doodles such as you may see on an uninspired poet's blotting-pad.

We were constantly preoccupied with money, which, for the first ten years we needed in vast—in increasingly vast—quantities. Of what use was I, then, to such a man as Chinchilla? I used to wonder until, one day, I heard Chinchilla say: "It is essential for a man to employ somebody he can trust to do the piddling little jobs for which he has neither time nor inclination." Then my primary function became apparent: I was his Personal Assistant, his yes-man or his no-man as the case might be; his watchdog, his scout, his Deputy, his Delegate, his Substitute. I was invaluable as a taker-out-to-lunch of people whom Chinchilla couldn't be bothered to meet but could not afford to ignore. I was the cleaner-up of his engagement book; it was I who emptied his social slop-pail. I was his ambassador on occasions when he was too proud to coax a temperamental actress or an awkward director. He used my bended knees to beg on.

Also my ideas were useful to him long before we made talking pictures and before we could afford to outbid the rest of the world in the unending auction sale of talent.

I had always had an eye for the dramatic and a knack of making up stories. But without Chinchilla I'd never have amounted to anything because I had no will; I could never work without a goad. In any case I never had enough faith in my own ideas to insist upon them nor enough courage to fight or starve for them. They needed, too, the constant supervision of a practical man. For example there was the business of *The Black Pit*. Once I had occasion to pass through a Welsh village—it sounded like Pillygollywog—and I saw the misery of the unemployed miners there. I was appalled by the wretchedness of these men of the pits, and moved nearly to tears by the courage and the patience of their women. They made a tremendous impression upon me, those strong, hungry Welsh faces savagely tattooed with blue coal specks. I saw myself as a Zola of the screen, arousing the National conscience with a new *Germinal*, and so I outlined a screen story about the life and death struggle of men underground, the climax of which was a pit disaster. Oh, the dripping white faces of the women waiting at the gates in the wind and the rain!

Chinchilla liked the idea very much and said he had always known I had it in me; but it was too unrelieved. "People simply will not pay their money to be depressed," he said.

"They paid hundreds of thousands of pounds, Walter, to see *The Ghoul*."

"Will you never understand? *The Ghoul* was nightmare horror, Edgar, about a mad man who robs graves and brings the dead to life. People like that sort of thing, but not squalor. You can convey your idea through the medium of a somewhat lighter story. Later we can afford Art for Art's sake; but now, my dear fellow, we are financially somewhat rocky. . . ."

We made *The Black Pit*, only we called it *Love Will Find A Way*, and made the hero the son of the mine owner. He falls in love with a miner's daughter, but she won't marry a man who doesn't work for his living, and so he blacks



his face and becomes a miner. There is rivalry in the pit between him and a man called Morgan who also wants to marry the girl, and confides his sorrows to a comic pit pony named Sweetlips. But a Socialist agitator blows up the mine with a bomb, and Morgan and the hero are entombed. The mine owner himself, a fine old man, joins the rescue gang and works harder than anybody else. Underground his son is holding up the caving roof with his shoulders and shouting: "Get my friends out of here, and never mind about me." But in the end he is rescued, marries the beautiful Blodwen, is cheered to the echo as they come out of church under an arch of pit axes, and all the miners make merry at the wedding. The final shot is of Sweetlips eating carrots out of the hand of Morgan who is doing himself pretty well on beer and wedding cake.

It was the greatest of our earliest successes. Lord Geezle of the Deepdown Colliery decided that the films were a great power for good and tried to buy us out. We told him to go to the Devil, and so he financed Black Diamond Productions, and he and Chinchilla became enemies, intriguing against each other until the air became black with mystery. If a Chinchilla man walked into a bar the Black Diamond men there stopped talking, exchanged winks, hissed "Shush", and laid their forefingers against their lips. Once a man from Black Diamond tried to make Dirk van Dyk drunk and talkative. He would have done better to try his hand at squaring the circle or at a perpetual motion machine. After eighteen double whiskies with barley wine chasers the foolish man found that he, and not van Dyk, had got drunk and talked. So, in a fit of liverish rage, he called Dirk a filthy, stinking foreigner and hit him in the face. This was a rough game to play with Dirk van Dyk, who simply batted him from Wyndham's Theatre into the public lavatory with one blow of his big right hand.

Rest assured that Gammon Watkins made the most of the incident: AGENT ASSAULTS CAMERAMAN . . . FRACAS OVER TRADE SECRET, and all the rest of it.

Gammon Watkins was inexhaustable. He enjoyed making up lying stories, and had a real talent for imaginary interviews. Lola Pearl, according to one of his articles, could elucidate the Aristotelian definition of Substance, and Kuragin slept in an Egyptian mummy case. In an indiscreet moment I told him that my mother wouldn't let me learn fencing in case I got my eye poked out; and so he spread a story that I had been an accomplished duellist in my home town and was nicknamed The Ace of Blades. His power was terrible, because millions of people believed what he said and the subjects of his stories were compelled to do what the world expected of them. Tina Willows was coerced by publicity into buying a Problem Picture, a hideous canvas on which was depicted a flayed woman with boar's tusks pinned by the ears to a wrecked piano and knitting a baby's boot out of her own intestines, while the green and bloated corpses of three drowned men serenade her with broken trumpets. It was called "Suburban Family Group", and created a sensation. A lady threw a brick through the shop window in which it was hanging: she was in Watkins's pay of course. Then came the headline: ACTRESS BUYS SCANDAL PICTURE . . . "DISGRACEFUL," SAYS BISHOP. Tina said that it was three hundred and fifty pounds thrown down the drain; but, measuring the column inches of publicity and working out their value at current advertising rates Gammon Watkins proved to her that she was at least five hundred pounds to the good, and had the picture into the bargain. She said that she wouldn't have it in her place and so, shortly afterwards, there was a SCANDAL PICTURE STOLEN headline, and a TINA WILLOWS HEARTBROKEN, with a photograph; and finally STOLEN PROBLEM PICTURE FOUND TORN TO PIECES . . . "GOOD JOB TOO," SAYS RURAL DEAN, or words to that effect.

You never knew what he was going to do next. He built Volpone Steel into a figure of National importance by announcing that he had the hairiest chest in Europe—a

statement which provoked something like a riot. Men stormed the office crying for justice and tearing open their shirts to prove that compared with them Volpone was naked as a toy balloon. Then Watkins said that Volpone proposed to swim the Channel. Then he invented the famous packing-case trick. He put it about that he was going to nail Volpone in a packing-case with a hundred-weight of old iron and throw him over Westminster Bridge at high tide. On the appointed day he, Volpone, a doctor, and a priest made their way with a block and tackle to Westminster Bridge. Naturally, the police stopped them and arrested them for obstruction—which was precisely what Gammon Watkins had been relying on them to do. The Sunday papers were overflowing with the story.

Afterwards Watkins said to me: "What suckers they are. Volpone! That flabby catamite couldn't fight his way out of a lollipop-bag, let alone a packing-case."

"But what will you say when he is due to swim the Channel?"

"Oh, Chinchilla will put his foot down, or rather his lawyer will. Breach of contract: mustn't swim Channels. It's easy."

And incredible as it may seem he made headlines out of that too:—SCREEN CÆSAR BANS CHANNEL SWIM . . . HAIRIEST ACTOR IN TEARS . . . "UNBRITISH," SAYS L.D.S. SECRETARY . . . STEEL'S LIFE TOO PRECIOUS TO RISK, CLAIMS CHINCHILLA.

Volpone Steel's real name was Hans Pumpschiff, and he was an Austrian of stupendous physique and the kind of ugliness which women associate with superhuman virility. We had had his nose broken under anæsthetic by a surgeon with a little hammer, to give Volpone's face its manly distinction. I don't know what he used to do before he went on the screen; he wouldn't say. I didn't like him particularly—he used too much perfume—but women all over the world in a kind of super-plebescite voted him their Ideal Type: an honest to God hard-bitten male with

no damned nonsense about him, who ravished you and silenced protest with a punch on the nose. They saw, of course, only the Volpone Steel of the screen. Volpone, in two dimensions, was always strutting in uniform and beating women with riding crops. In real life he had nothing to do with women, but lived with a petulant young man named Putzi who made jealous scenes and cried a lot.

We made a star of him. His first big picture was entitled *Lord of the Lash*, a costume piece about a wild nobleman whom the heroine learns to love, after he has sabred the Black Baron in fair fight and earned his forgiveness for having thrashed her severely because she tried to knife him at their first meeting. It was adapted from the spicy novel of the same title by an old maid named Miss Twee, who called herself Zara Bold.

I am always astonished by these prim, tidy ladies who store up so much home-made jam, home-made chutney, and home-made wickedness; who save everything with fussy neatness, treasuring tangled string and brown paper and empty bottles; and who are proud of their prudence when they pick up and hoard something which somebody else has thrown away. The Devil knows what oddments of second-hand vice, what rags and selvages of lust they preserve, neatly folded and laid in lavender in the linen presses of their hearts!

I used to talk to Gammon Watkins about it. He laughed at me and said: "Forget it. It'll all be the same a hundred years hence."

We were out drinking together. I replied: "That's just the trouble: it'll all be the same a hundred years hence. No better, much the same."

"Forget it."

But I said: "You can be sent to prison for giving gin to a baby, but ruin his mind and pervert his instincts and corrupt his soul and nobody minds."

"Not a bit, nobody minds a bit, old fellow. Drink up."

"And so another batch of young people will see Volpone

and admire him. All the girls will want the boys to be like their dream hero in the picture, and the boys will want to please the girls and off we go in another vicious circle." I was a little maudlin. "But it's wrong, Watkins: it's wrong to enjoy being ill-treated, and it's wrong to find pleasure in ill-treating other people; and it's wrong to make that kind of thing glamorous and desirable. It's wrong, Watkins!"

"Absolutely. Have another drink."

We drank. I continued: "It's the Devil, Satan, the Evil One saying: 'Come on, children, it's manly to get drunk, it's sophisticated to be a Morphinomaniac, it's smart and fashionable to betray your husbands and wives; and violence and cruelty, my dears, are not only thrilling, but they lead to happiness ever after.' And it's wrong, Watkins. We must change all these things, Watkins. Watkins, we must open peoples' eyes and make them see the horrible meaning of the things they do. Instead of which——"

"Drink up and forget it, Edgar. Wait till you're my age. Lord, you make me feel old. When I was your age, old fellow, I also wanted to rush out and grasp the sorry scheme of bloody things entire, and shatter it to bits, and so on and so forth. But that was a hell of a long time ago, so cut it out—you make me feel a thousand years old. Here's good health. To hell with them all. Let them suffocate in their own muck. Let them stew in their own juice, hang on their own ropes, make their own beds and lie and die on them and go to the Devil their own sweet way. Cheers."

A drunken gloom was upon me. I said: "We are the enemies of God. We are corrupters of children. We are servants of the Evil One."

We had another drink, and Gammon Watkins told me an incredibly funny story. I laughed and cheered up. At last I got home. Gurth went into his daily delirium of joy at the sight of me. I sat down on the rug in front of the fire to stroke him, and fell asleep there. It was nearly dawn when I awoke with Gurth's ponderous weight on my chest:

he was more than three years old by that time; a fine strong dog with a frowning forehead and an air of gentlemanly detachment.

I had forgotten that conversation; now it comes back.

The Implacable Hunter is on my heels . . . but I have a long start of him.

. . . . .

"Wait until you are my age," said Gammon Watkins, between a yawn and a laugh, ". . . to hell with them all." I am much older than he was when he said this. Perhaps his attitude was best. There is a good deal to be said for it, I sometimes think.

Most men would turn from Christ returned in glory to snigger at a dog on top of a bitch. Why should I break my head and my heart over these soiled, furtive creatures whose beginning, aim and end is a sticky pit; who were born to dig their own graves and whose lives are devoted to the exploration of their own dirty blind-alleys—these dying eaters of dead things, these bags of guts and corruption stuck full of holes!

But even while I say this, I know that something better than sweat and dung filters through the porous fabric of man. I beg Man's pardon.

I have jeered at humanity as a eunuch jeers at women—my impotence puts on a mask of contempt. But it is I who am contemptible—I, who was always too timorous and too lazy to do what my conscience urged me to do—I, who never dared to cross the street unless somebody held my hand.

. . . . .

I would have given my eyesight for a little of the arrogant self-assurance of some of the people whom Chinchilla picked up out of the back streets. How lucky they are, these people who are blest with short memories and tall egos!

Lola Pearl who, a few years earlier, had sat sucking her

thumb, a tremulous girl in a rabbit-skin coat, became a great lady and a brazen virago whose smile was bestowed as a kind of accolade. Volpone Steel, with the stale smell of the Viennese gutters still clinging in his hair, stared the world out of countenance and lorded it in a sable coat. Tina Willows, with the marks of the Manchester tramcar-seats scarcely faded from her backside, was insulted by the suggestion that she should ride in anything less gorgeous than a turquoise Rolls-Royce. Even little Bunny Cuddles learned how to throw a temperament and cowed whole teams of strong men on the set by the merest hint of her displeasure, knowing that she had the power to sabotage a scene and waste thousands of the pounds Chinchilla was using up his life to get. When we were making a film called *Itsy Boo* she held up production for a week by insisting at critical moments that she wanted "to do wee wee"—and all because her mother had told her that she could not have a pet Chimpanzee that had taken her fancy. Crowthers Sexton, the most beautiful man in the world, remained unspoilt as a man, but having been foolish enough to fall in love and get married, he ruined himself as a romantic actor; got fat, bought a farm, and drifted away. But in general the big money went to peoples' heads and drove them mad. Jimbo was spending like a man who fears that he may fall down dead before his wallet is empty. He had eighty-five suits of clothes, twelve dozen shirts, sixty pairs of shoes, and bundles of flowered ties which made his wardrobe look like the hanging gardens of Babylon. Whenever you went to see him he would say: "Come and see my suits." It took him an hour to dress in the morning, and four hours to make himself look shabby enough to play his part . . . every rag had to be just so.

We had launched him with a series of Two-reelers, which achieved a mad success. Then, when Chinchilla wanted him to sign a new contract, the comedian developed an impenetrable reticence and murmured that he thought it was about time he went back to Tabernacle Jones. Chinchilla raised his offer. Jimbo said that it wasn't

a matter of money . . . and in any case Black Diamond were offering him even more. Chinchilla raised again. It was like a desperate poker-game played by expressionless men with their lives at stake. Jimbo capitulated at last and, with the air of somebody who is making a great sacrifice for a personal friend agreed to accept one of the most staggering sums of money ever paid to a comedian in the history of the Cinema. And then he blossomed in lurid colours overnight like a fabulous tropical plant; kept secretaries, could not be seen except by appointment; rented one of the most expensive flats in the West End, and gave ten pound notes to head-waiters. And then a Duchess invited him to a house in the country for a long week-end. I heard it from Tabernacle Jones. The old man was very sad because Jimbo would not let him go with him, and said to me: "Why, sir, there was a time when Jimbo would not move without me. I was like a father to that poor boy. He used to be quite happy with me, but now I am afraid he is discontented. Oh, I am not saying he doesn't love me any more; God forbid. Only he's made such a great success, he's found such a different way of life. Right from the first, when Mr. Chinchilla asked me to let Jimbo go to him, something in my heart seemed to tell me . . . but there, what is done is done, Mr. Prem, sir, done for ever never to be undone. Think twice, I always used to say. Ah yes, indeed! He'll never come back to me now; I know it; with all those suits of clothes and things. How can a man preach the Word of God with a gross of shirts? How can a man go about his Master's Business with eighty-five suits of clothes weighing him down? People wouldn't take him seriously. And Jimbo hates to be laughed at now. No, I have lost him now—in so far as he was mine to lose. The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the Name of the Lord, Mr. Prem! So I think I'll say good-bye and go back to my proper work—may I be forgiven for neglecting it all these years! Only I thought . . ."

I said: "I am sorry, Mr. Jones, deeply sorry."



"Are you, though?" he asked, wistfully looking at me with his clear, steady eyes.

I could not meet them this time, and looked away. He patted my shoulder and said: "No, no, my son."

He shook hands with me and caressed Gurth. Gurth was now a silent, mature dog in middle life; he lifted a warning lip and bristled.

Tabernacle Jones said good-bye and went away.

When Jimbo came back he hardly noticed that the old man had left him. He read the affectionate note pinned to his wardrobe door, stuck it into his pocket and shrugged his shoulders. His only comment was: "He might have told me he was going away. How was I supposed to know? I mean to say, after all, he had everything of the best here."

He was not a bad fellow at heart, but he had just shaken hands with a Duchess, an Earl, two Barons, three Society Beauties, and a famous Jockey. Later that day he asked me in his hoarse whisper: "I say, Edgar, how do you buy a Knighthood?"

The sky was the limit now for the great Jimbo.

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Later Jimbo and Chinchilla quarrelled. The comedian said that his contract was due to expire soon, and that if Chinchilla did not double his wages he would go to Black Diamond. At this, Chinchilla went into one of his quiet white rages. His voice became almost inaudible, his face turned grey, and his eyes became bloodshot. "Are you threatening me?" he asked.

Jimbo was frightened, but he was not a coward; he answered: "Yes."

Chinchilla said: "You cheap, dirty, gospel-grinding clown of the gutters! Just for that, I'll send you back where I found you."

Jimbo sneered and said: "I am going to Black Diamond."

"As far as you are concerned now, you swollen-headed Ape, all roads lead to the gutter. Remember, Mr. Jimbo, your luck is with me!"

At this Jimbo became very pale and left the office.

The red disappeared from Chinchilla's eyes and he settled down to a steady glow of anger. "What?" he said, "Does he think he can do this to me? Jimbo or any other son of a woman? Threaten *me*? Bully *me*! Coerce *Chinchilla*? By Christ! By Christ Jesus!"

"But Black Diamond?" I muttered. Chinchilla mocked me: "But Black Diamond, but Black Diamond! I have something here that will put Black Diamond in my left-hand waistcoat pocket! In six month's time, or in a year's time, I shall wipe my backside on Black Diamond and flush it away. I have it *here*." He banged the fireproof safe in the wall behind him.

I asked: "How? What have you got? Some more money?"

Chinchilla replied: "A Selenium Cell."

"And what does that do?"

"It turns light into sound."

\* \* \* \* \*

I have never disbelieved Chinchilla; I only failed to understand some of the things he said. *Selenium Cell that turns light into sound*—it sounded like something out of Jules Verne. Nevertheless the fact remained; Chinchilla had it. I learned, long afterwards, that our electricians had sifted it out of the dust and the ashes and the debris of Daumier's Studio. Daumier also had his satellites. Some of them were inspired, and among them was the unknown man who dabbled with Selenium tubes. The paper upon which he had made his notes was raddled with dampness and ringed by the wet bottoms of coffee cups. I am not capable of understanding the working of common quadratic equations. Such understanding cannot be imparted to me or knocked into me. But, as there was a man who found a key to the mysteries of Egypt through the Rosetta Stone, so, on the bridge-head of the Dark Continent of the Cinema, there was Pumphandler—another of Chinchilla's discoveries. Pumphandler was an awkward, uncomfort-

able nervous man who appeared to be afraid of everything. He touched a thing three times before he took it up and was afraid of boiling kettles. Yet he felt at home among the most terrible forces of Nature. His little white hands were terribly sensitive to rough surfaces and to heat and cold, and he had a scared, tentative way of touching such things as pins and needles: yet, moving among live wires charged with lethal thunderbolts of electricity these same hands were confidently at home. Pumphandler could not see the point in the simplest joke or perceive the most obvious aspect in the character of a fellow man. But out of a few scrawled lines on a bit of paper he could extract a principle, and all the algebraic X-es were an open book to him.

He came to Chinchilla first of all as a manipulator of lights. He had worked with Dirk van Dyk in Berlin, and with Briquette in Paris, where he had invented the P.H. Filament. Like nearly everybody else he was overwhelmed by the charm of Chinchilla and became his willing slave. Daumier left bales of scribbled paper. Pumphandler found something in a Bidet of the 1890's, among a bundle of rather dirty love letters. It was a quarto sheet of dark blue notepaper, slobbered over rather than inscribed with formulæ and little diagrams, which, like the symbolic writing of the ancient Mexicans, opened certain doors in minds properly attuned to such things.

Pumphandler, on the strength of a sheet of notepaper, became a monomaniac. He was a man who loved electricity and its possibilities as certain men love Chess. He would never accept credit for what he discovered because he had been working for the fun of the game. After many years he interpreted the meaning of the handwriting upon the quarto sheet; and the meaning of it was that light, with the aid of a certain tube, could make certain sounds. He went to Chinchilla—like a man with an unmentionable disease—and shyly asked for assistance under conditions of secrecy. Chinchilla was a man of his word: he told nobody—not even me. So, after a protracted period

of trial and error, Pumphandler, with eyes like stars, held up to Chinchilla something like an enlarged tulip-bulb of dirty-looking glass.

This was the Cell.

But the bulb was only a beginning. Pumphandler worked on, and Chinchilla paid his way. It all went down as Expenses, and the cost ran into thousands and thousands of pounds. In the end it was achieved. Chinchilla could make light and shade talk and sing, and he said nothing about it until the afternoon when Jimbo's swollen head burst.

Then he took me into a little room where I met Pump-handler, and saw one hundred feet of film. It ran for one minute. I saw a man fingering the strings of a banjo, drawing a deep breath, and playing a brief, lively solo; after which he got up and bowed. But this strip of film was different from all other films, because I heard the banjo playing, and I heard the tapping of the musician's foot upon the floor, exactly synchronised with every movement of the plectrum.

Chinchilla ran the film five times, until the significance of it struck me in the face, and I said to him: "If this is real, and not a trick, it seems to me that you have got something which no one else in the world has got."

Chinchilla smiled and answered: "It is real; it is not a trick, and I always have had something which nobody else in the world has had. Friend Prem, the films no longer merely act and dance—they speak."

He chuckled, slapped me on the back of the neck, and added: "Now let them gnash their little silent teeth!"

And so *Chinchatone* was born. Gammon Watkins excelled himself. He swamped every periodical with strange stories of the new miracle. Chinchilla had done it again. He had broken the silence of the screen. Daring men had experimented with sound-on-disc, synchronising a running film with a spinning gramophone record. But Chinchilla

married the visual to the audible, by means of his mysterious Tube.

He began with a series of very short films in which Montagne, the tenor, sang *Plaisir d'Amour*, and Pifferari played a cornet solo. These short sound-films were shown for the first time at the Imperial Palace Cinema, which was the largest cinema in the I.P.C. Group. Thousands of people lined up, in threes, brandishing their two-shilling pieces. Our sound system was expensive to instal. Prices had to go up. Yet nobody seemed to mind. Gammon Watkins organised bitterly acrimonious controversies in the Press: CAN FILMS TALK? BISHOP SAYS "BAH!" . . . IS CHINCHILLA MAD? CABINET MINISTER SAYS "POSSIBLY NOT" . . . NONCONFORMIST BUTTER-BARON DENOUNCES TALKING PICTURES. . . .

Then the I.P.C. Circuit and Chinchilla came to an agreement, in accordance with which our firm took over three hundred picture palaces all over Great Britain. We wired them for sound. "Are you wiring?"—this, among exhibitors, took the place of "How's all the family?" A lady named Dinger, who was a relief pianist in a cinema, chained herself to our railings: she had been getting thirty shillings a week for playing *Light Cavalry* to the Cowboy-and-Indian pictures in the afternoons, and now, she said we had taken the bread out of her mouth. She smelt of methylated spirits. At last, I thought, we had evolved a medium through which serious artists might say what they had to say. But it was necessary to establish ourselves. I wanted to make a sound-film of the life of Offenbach, but Chinchilla said that this was too big a thing to begin with; and too expensive—we were up to our eyes in debt. "You must dive before you come up to breathe," said Chinchilla. We spent our last farthing on a film called *Ungrateful Daughters*—a sort of King Lear in modern dress, the central character in which was a composer of symphonic poems whose three daughters leave home and throw away their 'cellos in order to become the Bingo Sisters who sing hot

stuff in a cabaret: the old man goes mad and is caught in a thunderstorm, but at last he comes to his senses and they all sing a song called *She Was Only A Conductor's Daughter*.

There was a revaluation of values. Lola Pearl began to take lessons in elocution, and we discovered that she could talk a beautiful kind of broken English. Volpone Steel, through a sound track, sounded like a refugee costermonger selling bananas: we sent him back to the gutter. Tina had a ridiculous North of England accent, and became a comedienne: she had played parts which demanded expensive dresses and fur coats, but as soon as she started to talk it was necessary to reconstruct her as a mill girl in clogs and a shawl. Little Bunny Cuddles became an anachronism, with her ear-splitting squeak. Kuragin, after lying prostrate with nervous diarrhoea for a month, broke his contract and went to Black Diamond, where Jimbo, whose pockets were stuffed with all the money in the world, fell into his arms and outlined schemes for a formidable alliance.

Poor Jimbo! He sounded very queer indeed, and a Voice was found for him, at fabulous cost. Jimbo and his Voice made two pictures which showed a fair profit; and then the Voice revolted, demanded more pay, and died of chagrin during the arguments. Black Diamond had to pay Jimbo his wages for the period of the contract—a great deal of money. But Jimbo couldn't keep it: he had his mania for beautiful clothes, and was trying to get into Society. The last time I saw him, five years ago, he was compère in a night club, *The Teapot*, where they specialised in the resurrection of poor old broken-down vaudeville turns. Baggy old ladies and pouchy old gentlemen of the Edwardian Period came through billowing tobacco-smoke and, staggering under the weight of their years and half dead of wretchedness and fatigue, tried to sing the songs and dance the dances through which they had earned nation-wide fame and fifty pounds a week at the beginning of the century. Jimbo was introducing them and, with cruel little backhanded gestures, making fun of them,

while they performed he hovered behind them and imitated them. He got all the laughs, but the performers felt for a minute or two that they had recovered their old greatness . . . until they looked round at Jimbo. And then a glory faded and their faces became dead, and they went out looking older than ever.

. . . . .

And so passes worldly glory.

There was a desperate reshuffle. Glazer, who had made a name for himself through his productions of the plays of Schiller and Shakespeare, came to us and made the all-talking, all-dancing, all-singing *Love Thief*. The Theatre gave a little false gasp of ecstasy and opened its legs. The exhibitors of films had to wire for sound or perish. Old Sam Gutz of the Gutz Cinema Circuit said that at last the hegemony of the musicians was destroyed: he still kept two or three silent halls, and could get a Leader-Violin-Musical-Director for two pounds a week. Whenever he wanted to keep his musicians to heel, Gutz brought in an electrically-operated gramophone, and gave them all a long, hard look. Everybody rushed the gates of the studios—there was no hope beyond the sound track.

But then Schatz discovered another sound system which he called *Shatz-Bang*, and he and Black Diamond became friends. New stars appeared. Old stars disappeared. The firm of Trevelyan P-X, which had been tottering on the verge of bankruptcy, hit the world market with a shattering box-office success entitled *The Blonde And Oscar*, and so became a dangerous competitor. We made several millions, and spent several more. But we were having fun. Chinchilla, I think, invented this expression in relation to working and suffering. "Are you having fun?"—he would say this on all occasions. Once, a script girl was delivered of a seven-months' child on the set, and Chinchilla, holding her hand, said: "But tell me, are you having *fun*?" She, looking into his eyes, said, with tears of agony and of adoration: "Oh, yes, frightful fun."

One night I went home and missed something. I wondered what, until I went into my bedroom, where I found Gurth with his chin on the edge of my bed. He ought to have overwhelmed me with caresses—these were what I had missed. Gurth was sitting heavily, looking tired, and all his battle-scars showed white in the light. He was ill; I sent for a Vet, who said: "But how old is he?"

Inside me I felt something going down.

"Good God, he is fourteen years old," I replied.

"He has had his day," said the Vet. "It would be better if I put him to sleep."

"Can't you save him?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Will you hurt him?"

"Not a bit."

"It must be done?"

"It would be kindest."

"Then do it."

Later the Vet telephoned and told me that he had a cross-bred Manchester Terrier that could do tricks, and asked whether there was a chance for it in a film.

I miss Gurth. Only a little while ago, as it seems now, I was punishing him for being too young. And now here I am looking down into this sickly yellow puddle of lamp-light and mourning him. He died of old age more than a dozen years ago, and I am very much alone.

I had loved the dog. For a little while after his death I clung desperately to the shadow of Chinchilla. He was never less than great, and always kind. One night I said to him: "My dear Walter, do you remember how, years and years ago, when I first came to London with you, we went for a walk; and do you remember the wonderful things we talked about?"

Evening had come, a brumous autumnal evening.

"Let us go for a walk, then," said Chinchilla. So we walked. Chinchilla told his chauffeur to wait. Ted was



dead: this was another chauffeur who looked like George Raft, and spoke like a cabinet minister. Almost instinctively we covered the old route.

"Look at that river, under that mist! Look at those strange streets—see that bridge as the dark gathers about it!" I said, somewhere near Millbank.

Chinchilla made a derogatory gesture and said: "Yes, yes, yes, but what are we to do with these exteriors in *Diamonds for Daphne*?"

"Shall we have a drink, Walter?"

"Edgar, you are drinking too much; you should take a cure."

"Shall we go into this pub?" It was the dreary little public-house into which we had gone on our first walk together in London. Chinchilla shrugged as if he was carrying a fifty-six-pound weight on his left shoulder, and we pushed our way past the swinging door and ordered two glasses of beer. A little blonde girl served us, looking hard at Chinchilla: then she looked at herself in a mirror upon which was inscribed *Handel's Lager*, and, turning to serve an old man in the public bar, spoke to him in a great, throaty scream, wagging her hips at us.

"Let us get out of here," said Chinchilla.

The barmaid bounded back and asked: "Aren't you Mr. Chinchilla? Excuse me asking, but I saw your picture in a book called *Bystander*. I——"

We left our beer on the bar and walked out into the dark, and made our way in silence for five hundred yards. "Do you remember, when we walked this way together that night? Do you remember all the things——"

"No," said Chinchilla.

"But do you remember the Belgian barmaid in that pub, when you said——"

Chinchilla said: "Edgar, you are drunk, and when you are drunk you are a bore. Go home."

I went home. My flat looked bigger than the Sahara Desert.

"... Solitude can be well fitted and set right, but upon a very few persons. They must have enough knowledge of the World to see the vanity of it, and enough Virtue to despise all Vanity; if the mind be possess'd with any Lust or Passion, a man had better be in a Fair, than in a Wood alone. They may, like petty thieves, cheat us perhaps, and pick our pockets in the midst of a company; but like Robbers, they use to strip and bind or murder us when they catch us alone. This is but to retreat from Men, and to fall into the hands of Devils. It is like the punishment of Parricides among the Romans, to be sew'd into a bag, with an Ape, a Dog, and a Serpent. . . ."

Cowley was right.

And so was Stevenson. *All their lives long, the desire of good is at their heels, the implacable Hunter.*

Pulvis et Umbra!

. . . . .

. . . Prem saw something like a glossy, vacillating spinning disc of blackness with a rocking parallelogram of wavering yellow light. *Sound on disc*, he thought; but the thing was spinning behind his eyes, inside his head. He shook himself. "What a lot I have written!" he said.

But then he opened his eyes, shook himself again, and looked at the paper before him. There it was, mottled by dampness and smelling of age and imprisonment. At the top of the right hand page appeared the words:—

*Every man must bear the weight of his own dust.*

After that, nothing marked the page except a meaningless scribble. The pen had meandered away until it had dried, an inch or two from the lower right-hand corner of the page.

A dim greyness where the curtains met indicated that the dawn had come, while a spinning in Prem's head and an unpleasantness in his mouth proved to him that he had been drunk again and asleep at his desk.

## PART III

### THE DOGS BARK BUT THE CARAVAN PASSES

ARCHIBALD opened his little bar at half-past eleven in the morning. By noon he was already hard at work. Archibald's Bar was in the little lounge behind the Café Lafayette; a kind of fully-licensed cubby-hole on the ground floor at the back of the mirror-lined main room where meals were served. In its way it was the most exclusive and intimate bar in London, so small that one could scarcely lift a drink without upsetting somebody else's glass or change position without treading on somebody's foot. People got acquainted there, like castaways on a raft; yet Archie managed to keep the company Select. He could get rid of an unwanted customer by a process of freezing. He didn't chuck out; he excommunicated. A notorious woman who got her living up and down Glasshouse Street tried to get into Archie's Bar in order to be among the celebrities. She said, later, that after fifteen minutes she was compelled to go to the ladies' room and look at herself in the mirror to be certain that she really existed, and was a creature of flesh and blood and not a figment of her own imagination; for Archie had failed to notice her. He had served a lady on her left and another on her right, but although she pounded the marble bar with her fist and tapped it with a coin, and, losing her temper, asked Archie who the bloody hell he thought he was anyway, he could not hear her. She went away and never came back. She was not Archie's sort of customer; he served only the best people—journalists, theatrical ladies and gentlemen, script writers—in general, the cream of the cream. In his bar you couldn't sneeze without blowing powder off the chin of a man of letters or disturbing the hair of a great actress. More brilliant conversation was exchanged at Archie's Bar than anywhere else in the world. It was the Mermaid Tavern of its time. Hand-in-hand, men from Broadcasting House exchanged their hopes and fears in the corners; the

place was full of strange noises, from the Maracca-like chatter of authors talking about what they meant to do next time, to the piping of playwrights with all the world against them. Here, a writer of additional dialogue smoothed a new fur coat with her grubby hands and told her friends how Louis B. Mayer and Warner Brothers had gone down on their bended knees, while Korda had cried like a child . . . but she wouldn't take a penny less than ten thousand. There, twittering in an uneasy group, half a dozen ardent young makers of documentary films told one another of their genius and their sufferings. This rail had supported the feet of agents. Raycoff himself had had his monumental quarrel with Fifty-fifty Willie Wardour; and some of the most sought-after hams in Christendom had warmed the leather of these tall stools. From twelve to three and from five-thirty to eleven o'clock at night, the brilliant company came and went. Archie used up three damp cloths every day, in wiping the pencilled millions from the marble. He was one of the most envied men in England, for it was his privilege to stand and listen all day long to the words of the wise, the beautiful, and the successful, so that his life was one uninterrupted intellectual treat. Film stars talked to him as an equal; newspaper men told him what was going on in the world; great critics gave him inside stories; assistant directors wept on his shoulder and sometimes whispered shocking scandals; press agents slipped him the word about who was sleeping with whom, and how, and where, and why, and since when. He was the first to hear how Jona liked to be tied up with a pyjama-cord, and why Dickie Harmless bought the dog whip at Swaine and Adeney. The mythology of contracts, the autobiographical hagiology of agents; the ichthyology of frigid husbands—all knowledge came his way. Since he remained sober while everybody else got drunk, he could form all sorts of useful and interesting opinions about people. Everybody said that he'd be a fool if he didn't write his memoirs: they would be worth two-thousand pounds of any publisher's money in advance. Evans

approached him once, but he only shook his head and smiled his polite mysterious smile for Archie never talked; he only listened taking everything in, and exchanging the merest commonplaces of conversation.

On the days when new films were shown to the press Archie's Bar was so crowded that it was necessary to go to the toilet for a breath of fresh air. One steamy hot day in July a thirsty mob of men and women packed themselves into Archie's Bar to talk about the latest Chinchilla production, *Gushing Glory*, a film about an oil king who started life with nothing and died worth two thousand million pounds. Some said that it was the most terrific picture ever made, others, that it was the greatest film that ever could be made, while a few sardonic crape-hangers simply said that it was magnificent. Only John Jacket of the *Sunday Special* seemed unimpressed by *Gushing Glory*. He said:—

"Oh, sure, I know all about it. It's huge, enormous, mammoth, Brobdingnagian, immense, mighty, super-stupendous, elephantine, all-comprehensive, towering, titanic, grand, sublime, eternal, and all that. It will gross ten million, and live for ever. The actors were miraculous. The camera work contained fifty-seven varieties of immortal perfection. The Director might have been Merlin, Prospero, and Whatsiname all rolled into one, and as for the cutting—well, God Almighty who cut a super-spectacle in six days and rested on the seventh, couldn't have cut it better. I know all about that. But it stinks in my nostrils, and you can take *Gushing Glory* and, as far as I am concerned, you can wrap it up in your eulogies, and you can stick it——"

"Ladies present," said Heinz Beans of the *Daily Pictorial*.

"—I beg their pardons, but ladies who hang around bars must expect to hear a few naughty words now and again. They should be at home, washing their babies. They should be suckling their young, not getting drunk on gin at mid-day and smoking cigarettes in public-houses. I will proceed. You can take your *Gushing Glory*, and you

can wrap it up in all the column inches of publicity which you are hired to give it, and you can stick it up on the upper shelf in the dust and the silence. It is rubbish, filth, poison!

"Do you realise that seven of the best writers, fourteen of the finest actors, and a team of the most brilliant technicians in the world, under the guidance of Eastlight, who is one of the most skilfully creative directors that ever lived, have been brought together and bribed with money and prestige to make one of the most dangerous men in the world look noble? That all this beauty, wit, and imagination—all this fire of the gods—has been wasted on a hot-air balloon about a dirty little travelling salesman who lied, cheated, and pilfered his way to power? Do you think that the Oil King in real life was a good man? He was a louse. Chinchilla's picture represents him as a sort of saint; austere, æsthetic. Having control over half the money of the world, he lived on a glass of milk and a bismuth tablet. He could have bought any piece of womanhood he happened to fancy; but he was chaste. Do you think, do you really think that he was a man who controlled his appetites? No. He over-indulged his one and only appetite, his appetite for money *as* money and power for its own sake. Do you really think that because in his old age he gave away some hundreds of millions, he was fundamentally a giver? You know very well that if he didn't give it away the tax collectors would have taken it, and so—since he had to part with the money—he decided that he might as well buy himself a little glory with it to go on and on as the perpetual publicity you get if you put your name on a Hospital or an Institute as a public benefactor. You know all this very well, don't you? And all the same you'll go away from here and boost that stinking picture to high heaven. That mass of beautifully and dramatically-presented lies—you'll have hysterics in your column, you'll lick Chinchilla's boots, you'll erect a grove and worship the Baalim and castrate yourselves on the golden altar. And why? Because here is the real big stuff. Because you want to keep

in with Chinchilla. Because Chinchilla, as you very well know, has bought hundreds of you to write for him at high prices, and you hope to catch his eye. And because Chinchilla—that Mammon, that Dagon, that bronze Baal with a furnace in his belly, that inhuman devourer of children—he buys more advertising space in your papers than your proprietors care to lose. And you call yourselves critics! If you believe what you say you are imbeciles. Some of you are. Some of you are not, and are hypocrites therefore. Go on! Sing! Dance! Lash yourselves into a frenzy! You Carthaginian priests! But I tell you that Baal was nothing but a hollow bronze statue. Only priests and worshippers made a god of that statue, and they made it evil, too, by worshipping it just as you make people like Chinchilla evil by worshipping him, by being anxious for his favour and afraid of his displeasure.”

Beans said: “You are talking a lot of rubbish, Jacket. A big film can be good as well as a little one.”

“There is the whole point. You have a conscience—it is not quite dead—only you have pampered it until it is like a fat, old, constipated Pekinese, snoring on a cushion in a prostitute’s bedroom. Once in a while it shows its rotten old teeth and gives a wheezy little growl, and then you throw it a biscuit and stroke its ears. You know perfectly well that you are the hired kept boy of Chinchilla the advertiser, and so once in a while, to save your face, you give a little praise elsewhere, and fondle one of the highbrow boys. You make me sick. I’m tired of you.”

Beans and some of the others laughed, without malice, and slapped Jacket on the back. They knew John Jacket of old. He had been talking like this for twenty years, and yet he worked for the *Sunday Special*. And there, as elsewhere, it was necessary to suck up to the advertisers, to please men, women and children; to dust the coals, so to speak, and make everything look clean and tidy. Righteous indignation was passed through the coarse filter of Policy and rubbed through the fine sieve of the Libel Expert. It was unwise to say anything that everybody else had not

already agreed with. Still, there was always human interest and the *Sunday Special* had grown great on this.

The *Sunday Special* could squeeze more out of a man than a Chicago pork packer could get from a hog—it used everything, especially the squeal, or True Confession. Its feature writers smoked the fat hams of Sentiment, boiled up the old bones of Scandal, gave a rosy colour to the sausage meat of Marriage, spiced the insipid rissoles of Passion, re-labelled the tripe and trotters of Family Life and stuffed and cooked the slippery entrails of the Inside Story. Thus, you had to be a wealthy man before you could buy as much of its advertising space as your hand could cover; and therefore, if it wanted to be serious, it could pay for the most expensive names over the most enlightened opinions. On the other hand, the *Sunday Special* could out-bid the whole world for the personal stories that made the paper sell its five million copies every week.

Jacket, who was the highest paid journalist in Fleet Street was allowed a certain laxity. He was the *Enfant Terrible*. The proprietor knew that there was not one of his rivals who would not be glad to take Jacket on at his own terms. For the name of Jacket made circulation. Also, there was a certain prestige in having him under contract; he growled provocatively in readable prose, and had a frank, fearless manner. Sometimes John Jacket went out to get a story, to make a report, or to interview somebody. Then, he could always be relied upon to find a new, strange angle. He never smirked at the visiting celebrity, but went after stewards, secretaries and servants. Jacket used to say that the most marvellous things in the world are invisible and colourless. . . . "Think of Leeuwenhoek the microscopist," he used to say, "he put a little drop of stagnant water under a microscope, and he found all sorts of infusoria, a whole world of things that wriggled, fought, made love, were born, struggled and died—and all in a drop of stagnant water!" Sometimes, when he was accused of seeing only the ugly, evil aspects of things, he referred again to the magnifying glass. He would say: "To hell



with romance! I look at things closely; that's all. If you look at a fly under a strong lens, and it is revealed as a filthy creature of rottenness, alive with poisonous bacteria and plastered from head to foot with filth, you are seeing that fly as it really is. You are not magnifying the dirtiness of it—you are simply opening your eyes to the truth of it. What if the truth is sometimes disquietingly ugly? Better to see something you don't like, than to be blind."

Yet not even Jacket dared to defy the advertisers, as long as he worked on the *Sunday Special*. Still, he managed to utter frightful heresies disguised as jokes, in his burlesque and comic pieces.

Now, while the veteran critic Hipson drank his health, Jacket grumbled: "And as for you, you are one of the worst of the lot. You are not a hypocrite or a lick-spittle by nature, and so you have talked yourself into believing everything you say is true. You started out to lead the public and the public ended by leading you. You are like the man who set out to hypnotise the chicken; the chicken hypnotised him."

Hipson laughed, and raising his glass said: "Long live anarchy! The minority is always right. The smaller the minority, the righter it is. Jacket is in a minority of one, eh Jacket?"

"So was Lister, and look how he cleaned things up," said Jacket. "So was Bruneaseu, who first investigated the sewers under Paris. Nobody liked the smell of"—here Jacket used an Anglo-Saxon word—"but they didn't have the nerve to take a lamp and go down into the depths, and so they pretended that the stink was part of the proper atmosphere of the city, and the over-flowing of the drains, an act of God. But Bruneaseu put a clothes-peg on his nose and explored the drains, and made them decent."

Beans said: "John has this bee in his bonnet: whatever Chinchilla does makes him think of germs, and flies, and sewers."

"He spreads disease," said Jacket. "He is Bad Taste made infectious by money and success."

Hipson asked: "As a matter of curiosity, have you ever met the man?"

"Hardest man to meet in the world," said Beans.

Jacket looked up and snapped: "A stunt, a gag. The megalomaniac, the little celluloid Jehovah coiled up in his tin-can Ark, in his Wardour Street Holy of Holies."

Somebody else said: "You try and see him, just try and get an interview. You just try."

Jacket replied: "I bet a fiver I meet him by Thursday."

"That's a bet," said Hipson.

"I'll have a fiversworth of that too," said Beans.

Jacket knew how to get in touch with anybody whom he wanted to meet. He could make contact with Archbishops, Kings, and Prime Ministers. He went now, to George Window who was a friend of Edwin Brick, and said: "Now look here; you're a pal of Chinchilla's."

Brick said: "A pal? Oh no, no pal. I'm only a publicity man. Not by any means a pal. Good God, what, me? *Me* a pal of Chinchilla?"

"You knew Gammon Watkins?"

"Naturally I did, he was my best friend; many's the good turn old Gammon did me. Good old Watkins!"

"I want to see Chinchilla."

"Some hopes!"

"Brick, I must see Chinchilla."

"Look here, Jacket; I've been working for Chinchilla more than seven years, and I've only seen him three times."

"Brick, it's *necessary* for me to see Chinchilla. Introduce me to Chinchilla, will you?"

"I could introduce you to Miss Apple."

"Who's she?"

"Well, she's secretary to Edgar."

"Edgar? What Edgar?"

"So sorry—Edgar Prem."

"Introduce me to her, then."

"Do I have to? I mean to say, must I really? I'd rather not, but if you really want me to . . ."

"Be a good fellow, and do it as quickly as you can."

Miss Apple was a thin, blonde woman with a hooked nose, and she had warts on her chin. She said:—

"I'll have to refer you to Miss Nightie. She is Mr. Prem's personal assistant. She might put you in touch. You must understand that Mr. Prem is a very busy man."

John Jacket lost his temper and began to chew up and spit out words.

"Madam, I don't give a damn how busy anybody may happen to be. I want to see your master. If you don't organise a meeting immediately I shall kick his door down and then, if he wants to make an issue of it, I'll make the biggest stink that ever——"

"But Mr. Jacket, sir, Mr. Prem is out at lunch."

"Where?"

"Will you promise not to say I told you?"

"Of course I promise," said Jacket.

"At the *Beatrice* in Victoria Street."

"You're lying to me," said Jacket; but at the same time he smiled, and his smile was of peculiar charm.

"Oh no, Mr. Prem nearly always goes to Mr. Cenci's when he lunches out alone."

"Cenci, what Cenci?"

"They are old friends," said the young woman, with a deprecatory shrug of a shoulder.

"What perfume do you use?"

"I don't use perfume."

"What size stockings do you take?"

"Nine-and-a-half."

"You shall have six pairs of the best."

Jacket took a taxi to the *Beatrice*. A small old man, fat and sleek as a dolphin, greeted him.

"Is Mr. Prem here?" asked Jacket.

"The Baron de Prem? No. Can I take a message, please?"

"Are you Mr. Cenci?"

"If you please."

"I am John Jacket, *Sunday Special*. How do you do? Don't you come from Parma?"

"No sir—I am from Milan."

"You look exactly like a gentleman I used to know in Parma—Parma, Borgotaro. Daniele Cenci."

"Ah no, no. But——"

A few minutes later Cenci was telling Jacket the story of his life.

"Mr. Prem is a good friend of yours, his secretary tells me," said Jacket.

"The Baron is a Jesus, a God," said Cenci. "He is a gentleman."

"You know Chinchilla?"

Cenci's eyebrows said *Yes*, while his shoulders said *Not very well*, and his left hand said *I do not want to know Chinchilla*. Jacket cried: "Ah-ah! You must be the man——"

"Yes, yes, yes—the cheque, the five hundred a-pound tip. Quite aright, sir. Sure, sure; he gimme five hundred a-pound. Umm, yes, the Lord gave and so the Lord took away."

"Did you put your money in Daumier-Doyle?"

"That afirst atime Mr. Chinchilla gone smash? Sure, sure, sure: eight a-thousand pound—*splosh*—like a-that! Stocks, shares, markets, ah! No more, no more! My lovely little a-hotel! All gone down a-sink. So afterwards I got to take a job serving egg-a-bacon at a nightaclub. Right. The Lord gave, the Lord took away. But I think a-myself: 'Next time somebody try and give me a five-hundred-a-pounda tips, I chuck him outa my restaurant.' No more! No more! But the Baron . . . ah!" said Cenci, screwing up his eyes.

"He helped, did he?"

"The Baron de Prem? Ah, a gentleman!"

"And now everything's smooth?"

"You wait a minute—I show you a picture my gran-children, eh?"

"I'd like to see it very much."

Cenci took out a pocketful of photographs, but then the swing-door thudded, and he spun on his heel and hustled away to welcome a very handsome elderly gentleman who had just come in.

Jacket saw a pale man with an air of aristocratic languor and a noble head of silvery hair. The newcomer was dressed in a grey suit with a white waistcoat, and he looked so crisp and clean that Jacket felt dirty and stale: he had always envied men whose linen stayed fresh, unblemished by the humidity of the city in July. "Fop!" he thought. Then the beautifully-dressed man turned so that his face caught the light, and Jacket saw that he was tired and unhappy, weary with the droopy weariness of a man who has nothing important to do. The languor was real; the nonchalance was not assumed; the man had had enough of life.

"Mr. Prem?" said Jacket.

"Yes?"

"May I introduce myself? John Jacket."

"Really?" asked Prem. "The John Jacket who writes in the *Sunday Special*? I'm a great admirer of your work, Mr. Jacket—it's a great honour to meet you."

"Have a drink," said Jacket.

"I don't mind if I do," said Prem.

Cenci wagged a finger, and a thick-set girl with a dark moustache came running with a bottle.

Prem said: "I come here to avoid people I don't want to meet. It's such a pleasure to meet someone I've always wanted to know. What a fortunate man you are, Mr. Jacket! How wonderful it is, to be able to say exactly what you want to say and never be at a loss for words! With your talent, what a——"

Prem stopped abruptly, blinking.

"Hm?" said Jacket. "What a——?"

"I nearly said something silly," said Prem, with a laugh. "I nearly said: 'What a future there could be in films for a man like you.' Your good health, Mr. Jacket."

"Good health, Mr. Prem."

"I . . . somehow I needed a drink. Ah, Cenci—you might just as well leave the bottle."

"For a-you, Monsieur le Baron, I leave my wife and children," said Cenci.

. . . . .

By half-past two John Jacket was digging a foothold not far from the edge of sobriety, and Edgar Prem was drunk.

"Jacket," he said, "listen to this:—

"One morning, awakening, she touches herself beneath the white blanket under which she has slept, and discovers that she is warm, nubile, and odorous.

"So the young year arises, singing, and throws off her veil of rain, lets fall her girdle of cloud, and gives herself to the world.

"Soon she puts on a loose robe of rustling green; placidly drowsing, contentedly smiling, swollen big, she sits and murmurs a sleepy song in the sun.

"But at last, grey and bitter, famished and shivering in the tattered rags of her old finery she waits, weeping for her lost beauty and her dead fruits, knowing that another Spring is coming to drive her away forever.

Guess who wrote that. I wrote that. *Song Of Summer*. Thirty years ago, Jacket; thirty years ago."

"Oh dear me; poor Prem, poor Prem!" said Jacket.

"Go on, laugh at me!"

"Not I, Prem; not for the world."

"Yes, go on, laugh. But I might have been a poet, once upon a time."

"*'A stampless penny: a tale, a dream,'*" grunted Jacket.

"Why weren't you a poet, then?"

"I don't know."

"Prem, poets die in draughty attics. Thank your lucky stars."

"Jacket—listen to me, Jacket—with me, money never was an object."

"What was an object, then?"

Prem shook his head: he was bewildered.

"Love?" asked Jacket.

Prem shrugged his elegant shoulders and said: "Yes, perhaps. I used . . . Jacket, don't laugh at me?"

"I won't."

"Please don't. I used to want to save the world. Do you know that when I was a boy . . . at home, at dinner-time, sometimes . . . all of a sudden . . . I'd choke. I couldn't eat another mouthful, because I'd remember that somewhere, somewhere in the city, somebody was hungry. So I wanted to run out with my plate and give it to all the hungry people in the world. And then, later—don't laugh—when I heard about the struggles of Beethoven, I said 'God, send me a hungry Beethoven to take care of, and we'll see if he has to want.' I——"

"Beethoven took care of himself, my angel! He had the glory and the dream, Brother Prem. But go on about yourself. What happened to your Vision Splendid?"

"Chinchilla might——" began Prem; but he stopped.

Jacket gulped back the acrid after-taste of an undigested hate, and kept his mouth shut. Prem started again:—

"Chinchilla was going to——"

Prem could not put it into words.

"Put the world right?" suggested Jacket.

"You're laughing at me. You're mocking me. Don't mock me. Don't laugh at me." Prem looked weak and old, and Jacket felt indefinably miserable.

"What sort of a man is this Chinchilla?" he asked.

"Very great," said Prem.

"In what way very great?"

"Great," said Prem.

"What has he done that's great?"

"He is a great man." Prem swallowed another mouthful of his drink, locked his fingers like a doubter at prayer, and said: "A great inspirer of art. He has played black against white. Chinchilla has made living things immortal, and brought dead things to life. He——"

"—*Gushing Glory*, for example," said Jacket.

"—Chinchilla—"

"—Excuse me; I don't believe in Chinchilla. I can imagine him," said Jacket, striking a Napoleonic pose and pulling a lock of his grizzled hair over his forehead, "I can imagine Chinchilla talking like this . . . 'Gentlemen, you will place Infinity upon a screen, send Life sliding down a beam of light through a strip of celluloid, see as the sun secs; shuffling shadows, selecting the one ineluctable angle out of the three-hundred-and-sixty degrees; handing on for ever certain great moments. Gentlemen, with agony and patience you are going to work hand-in-hand with the Light and the Dark, finding wonder in a smoking chimney and glamour in a shadowy doorway, enchantment in a raindrop, lightning in a glance, thunder in a broken rope of pearls, and eternity in the pendulum of a clock in a darkened room. Aha, yes, gentlemen, through you and you alone the pure essence of things will distil drop by drop. . . . So now let us get to work on *Hips, Lips, and Slips*, featuring Primrose Bonfire the Schoolgirl Contortionist.'—*Fooy!*"

"Sir!" cried Prem.

"Ah, come, come," said Jacket, smiling at him.

"Jacket, I swear before God that you don't know Chinchilla!"

"Forget it, forget it Prem—forget it!"

"But *do* you?"

"Chinchilla would cut no ice with me, Prem."

"If you met him you'd agree that he was a great man, Jacket, I swear."

"Bet you a fiver," said Jacket.

"Done," said Prem, holding out a hand.

Jacket gripped it. The trap was sprung; but he felt flaccid, wrinkled and empty. "Introduce us," he said.

"This very afternoon," cried Prem.

"On the way I'll buy you a drink at Famagusta's," said Jacket. "I like you, Prem."

"And I like you," said Prem. "Famagusta's? What is that?"



"A club."

Prem sighed deeply and scribbled a signature across the bill. "Famagusta," he said, with something like a groan, "I don't know Famagusta. Lord God! How the world changes!"

"*Tout passe, tout lasse, tout casse*," said Jacket. "Patience, and shuffle the cards!"

As they went out Cenci said: "Oh God-all-blessed-mighty-Christ-Above! So nice to have a-such a-class a-people!"

. . . . .

But while Jacket was trying to stop a taxi as Prem, poisoned by the fresh air, leaned against a shop-window, a small old negro with foggy yellow eyes, came out of the gutter and wagged a finger at them. He was swaying drunkenly. Prem had never seen a more battered, emaciated man. Here, indeed, was the History of a Defeat bound in dried-up morocco and illustrated with cuts. Fifty years of life had folded the negro's face into cracks, like a tramp's passport; and he seemed to have had an accident, a head-on collision with a plate-glass window. In his left hand he clutched a guitar.

"Ever live in a flute?" he said to Prem.

"Why?" asked Prem.

The negro whispered: "Narrow, noisy, damp 'n dark! Dead quiet, cold 'n darker. But . . . Hi-ho!"

Jacket came back to listen. The negro began to speak a strange, meaningless language: "Chico! Nazdrovia, ch? Ca fait guten abend ce soir ce matin—ha? Che mi fa? Savez-vous gezondheid Amontillado con piselli au Borde-laise? La lingua non ha osso, ma fa rompere il dosso, ha-hum? Freedom, brothers?"

"Forgive me if I don't quite get it," said Jacket.

"Get it. Gaddida, khaddida, maddida, gelida-manina ice cold. Eh? Ice? Heiss, weiss? Black, and proud of it!" Then the little black man held out his guitar and added: "Ah'm mad, crazy. Not angry-mad, only mad. Them the

Lord wants to destroy—He makes them mad. Man, man, why be mad with me if the Lord wants to destroy me? *My fault?*”

“Here,” said Jacket, giving him a ten-shilling note. “No fault of yours at all, brother.”

“Too much trouble, too much everything.” The negro stuck the note into his breast-pocket. “But . . .” He fumbled at the strings of the guitar, feeling for a chord; grinned, struck, hit a discord; groped, flicked away a handful of plangent notes; wept, fumbled again and came up with a sour tangle of noise. “Gawd!” he cried. “Why make *me* mad? What good *that* do? Gawd, what good?” After that he stroked the strings as a forlorn old man strokes a tired old dog. And, like a good, well-beloved dog, the guitar made a last desperate response—a clear, sweet chord came out. His left hand gnarled and knotted; his right hung loose while the thumb explored the strings. He played, for about twenty seconds, so beautifully that Jacket waved away a taxi and stood frozen. Then a note went wrong. Something staggered. His music slipped, lost itself, and fell down and down into chaos.

“Gawd!” he cried, as the vibration of the last discord lost itself in the street. “Gawd! Why you want to destroy me? Gawd, what for *you* want *my* fingers? What *I* done? Why *me?*”

Jacket knew, then, that he had been somewhat drunk, and remembered that there are men whom Gods cast away—who fear the night, pray for dawn, and when day breaks yearn for the dark.

“Never mind Famagusta’s,” he said. “Take me straight to Chinchilla.”

You could never have guessed, now, that Prem was fuddled with liquor. “Please take us to Chinchilla House,” he said to the taxi-driver.

“Yes, Mr. Prem.”

Prem moaned: “Does *everybody* in this city know my face?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Prem,” said the taxi-driver.

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

In the taxi Prem started to laugh, but he saw his own reflection in the little oblong mirror, and paused. "What a sight! What a debased spectacle!" he exclaimed.

"Poor nigger," said Jacket.

"Nigger? I don't see your point."

"Oh, you don't, eh? *You* don't see my point, eh? What? Because you're not begging in the streets you can't see that there are men apart from yourself who are choking on their unsung songs? Eh?"

"Pardon me, Jacket: I was talking about myself. *I* am the sight; *I* am the spectacle. I am——"

"Please excuse me, Prem."

"Choking on their unsung songs," said Prem. "Well put. Well said. I was looking at myself in that glass, Jacket; at this face here, my own face. What do I look like to you? Tell me frankly."

"You've got eyes, a nose, two ears, and a mouth," said Jacket.

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"Jacket . . . a mirror reverses your reflection—a man can never know what his face really looks like. A mirror turns it the wrong way round . . . a camera is no more truthful than a pencil. You may ask me who cares. *I* care, Jacket. Tell me, what do I look like?"

"A cross between a minor poet and a gentleman."

"Yes, but what is it that you see in my face that I don't see in my mirror?"

"I see Prem," said Jacket. "You see a bit of propaganda—you see something you read about in a book once upon a time: I see you."

"Jacket, you don't know how much I respect your opinions. I want your opinion of Chinchilla."

"I must see him first."

"In three minutes, Jacket—no, in two minutes." The taxi was stopping. "In one minute, or less."

"We have a bet of a fiver."

"I'll write you a cheque."

"Wait, Brother Prem—you haven't lost it yet."

"Um? Oh . . ." The taxi stopped in front of a house with copper doors which flew open and let out a six-and-a-half-foot giant in pale grey livery, who offered Prem his arm.

So Prem and Jacket entered Chinchilla House; the copper doors closed behind them, and Gorod received them.

. . . . .

Gorod had the face and figure of a Tartar executioner: he stuck in your memory and gave you evil dreams. In spite of his enormous weight you could never hear him; with all his bulk he had a knack of disappearing. When he talked his big, rigid face scarcely moved, and his voice was a guttural purr which compelled you to whisper back. The giant in the pale grey livery let you in before you rang the bell: Gorod conducted you into the presence of a Secretary or—if you happened to be sufficiently important—as far as the door of Chinchilla himself.

John Jacket found himself in a great vestibule, dumb with rich carpet. Like everybody else he looked at the Indian painting of Mongol horsemen clashing with Chinese infantrymen, which hung on the right-hand wall, and was worth thousands of pounds: it was savagely vivid. Usually, as—looking from left to right—you got to the part of the picture in which the Khakhan is splitting the astounded Chinese from forehead to waist with one sword-stroke, up popped Gorod like a genie out of a bottle, making noises like an amorous panther and frightening you out of your wits. Gorod conducted visitors through strange, dim corridors decorated with museum-pieces. Here hung Napoleon's fowling-piece, near a snarling Japanese swordsman in full armour; there was a cluster of Polynesian devil-masks, and a porcelain Bikkhu who contemplated his thumbs.

Gorod opened a door, and then you found yourself in a long, low gallery full of green light, lined with illuminated tanks in which unheard-of tropical fishes hovered and

darted among floating weeds. You expected your gasp of amazement to be followed by a string of bubbles—you were in the waters under the earth, as it seemed, for the ceiling also was of glass, behind which a green light flickered and shifted, and dim brown shadows wriggled away.

You could not hear your footsteps on the sand-coloured carpet, over which Gorod guided you to the copper-walled passage with the crimson carpet, towards the copper door at the end. Then you passed into an anteroom of surgical white, where a woman of unearthly beauty smiled over a silver-and-ivory switchboard. She touched a button and received a sign. Gorod showed you the way to another door, black as a slice of night, with an opalescent handle like a diseased moon.

This was the door of Chinchilla's office.

It was like no other office. It was too vast for worldly affairs, too formidable for pleasure, and too austere for business: two hundred and twenty thousand cubic feet of pale blue light between six colossal slabs of frosted glass were absorbed by a glass desk as big as a skating-rink and blacker than the Last Circle of Ice, behind which, upon a chair like a throne, sat Chinchilla. Before him lay a writing-pad and an oval block of black wood studded with electric buttons: if he wanted anything he touched one of these buttons, and got it. It was not necessary to press hard—a touch was enough. You felt that if, by accident or caprice, Chinchilla slammed his hand down on the block, everything would happen at once, and the world would come to an end. And when you glanced at Chinchilla's face, it occurred to you that he would not care if it did.

Hard, white and rigid, Chinchilla looked like his own death-mask. He dressed untidily, now, in shabby old sack-coats and frayed shirts, and was known as the worst-dressed man in England. "Charming disregard for externals . . . evidence which proves that Chinchilla does not care for show, but attaches importance only to the

True Realities of Life," said the *Weekly Fan*. Others murmured that Chinchilla's clothes were an expression of arrogance, of his contempt for mankind. Let Kings and Presidents have their trousers pressed and put on fine linen: Chinchilla didn't need that kind of thing. Take him or leave him, like him or lump him, he was what he was; Chinchilla of Chinchilla House, the two-million-pound phosphor-bronze-and-glass wonder-building in Trafalgar Square, which was pointed out to tourists as the workshop of the master who created *Dolly's First Love*, and *Not Tonight Josephine*.

"Good God, what a place you have here!" said Jacket to Prem.

"We started in a furnished house. It was full of stuffed animals."

Jacket smiled. He looked around Prem's office, coveting the desk, admiring the dictaphone, sounding the panelled walls with inquisitive knuckles; and he observed that there was a framed photograph standing beside Prem's calendar—a snapshot of an ugly old ragged-eared dog. In front of this photograph there stood a small silver vase with two or three red roses.

"What do you do here?" asked Jacket.

"Nothing," said Prem.

"Well, now, what about Chinchilla?"

Gorod knocked and padded in. "If you please, Mr. Prem, Mr. Chinchilla will be free in one minute."

Prem began to suck a deodorising cachou; and in spite of himself, Jacket straightened his tie.

. . . . .

Chinchilla knew an enemy when he saw one; but he was a Black Belt in the jiu-jitsu of commercial diplomacy. He opened hostilities with a bow, fell prostrate before his opponents, and, when they had fallen over him, broke their limbs.

"I have often wanted to meet you," he said to Jacket.

"What for?"

"You're always so angry with me, Mr. Jacket. Now I wonder why you should be!"

"I make it fairly clear in my column, whenever I talk about you, I think. But I didn't come here to quarrel with you, Mr. Chinchilla."

"If you came to make friends with me, I'm very happy, Mr. Jacket."

Hard-headed but soft-hearted, Jacket was embarrassed by such courtesy from Chinchilla, against whom he had declared such a bitter blood-feud; he wished that he had never come to this huge, rich, inaccessible place.

"I didn't exactly come to make friends with you," he said. "I was simply curious to meet you . . . and then again, I was challenged. There were bets that I couldn't see you, and . . ."

"You, Mr. Jacket, were always welcome. You had only to ring Whitehall oooo."

"I expected you to have me thrown out," said Jacket.

"But why?"

"I've attacked you."

"This is a free country. Why shouldn't you attack me? Would you throw me out of your office if I attacked you, as a columnist?"

"No, naturally not."

"Yet you expected me to throw you out for attacking me as a producer? Now that, Mr. Jacket, that is unkind of you! Am I incapable of appreciating your right to speak your mind? And have I sunk so low that I no longer enjoy good prose, even if it is aimed at my head?"

"I never implied any such thing."

"If I offer you a cigar, will you go away and write a story about how I tried to bribe you, or make an impression on you? Will you have a smoke without prejudice?"

"Without prejudice," said Jacket, taking a big cigar.

"I gave it up myself years and years ago. So, Mr. Jacket, we've met at last. They call you Jacket the Giant-

Killer, I think. Do you still want to kill me? And if so, exactly why?"

"I never did want to kill you; only I couldn't approve of the pictures you turn out."

"Too popular?"

"What?" cried Jacket. "How can you say that to *me*? My column is popular, Mr. Chinchilla, but it never perpetrated a stroke of evil."

"Mr. Jacket, I give the public what the public wants."

"You make the public want what you give them," said Jacket. "I could build up a cake of soap by making women believe that they stank to high heaven if they didn't wash with it. So they'd buy it. So I'd sell it. So I'd be giving the Public what the Public wanted. Chinchilla, you betray yourself! You don't give—you sell. You're a salesman, not a giver. In Prem's room just now I was looking at a film-magazine. It was one solid lump of advertising—it was giving people what they wanted in the way of glamorous stories about film-stars; and glamorous ads about armpits, sweat-smells, dirty feet, underwear-daintiness, menstruation, cosmetics, toilet-paper, and face-paint. If that were the function of the printing-press . . . eh? And you—a solid, intelligent man—you have a thing as strong as a printing-press, and what do you do with it?"

"You disapprove?" asked Chinchilla.

"Yes, I do."

"Then change it all. Make the public want what *you* want."

Jacket said: "You're trying to be funny."

"No, excuse me, I'm not."

"Forgive me: it struck me that way."

"Quite wrong. I say again—change it all; make the public want what *you* want the public to want. Join us. Work *with* me."

"How d'you mean?" asked Jacket.

Stifling a sigh, talking rapidly without enthusiasm like a man who is resigned to the infinite repetition of an old, stale story, Chinchilla said: "Listen. Attacking me you



get nowhere. Working with me, you never need to do anything you don't want to do, or say anything you don't believe to be true. Curse, grouse, groan, bellyache, kick holes in everything—you will stimulate us, and help to make things better. Do what you like: learn something about this strange trade—be with us in a few conferences, modify plots, develop characterisations. If you disapprove, Mr. Jacket, then express your disapproval. You are a brilliant man, a man of talent, an honest man, a man with great ideas, a fine writer. Come and see how we have to work in this peculiar medium! It really is fascinating, wonderful—its possibilities are not half-explored yet. Come and impose your sensibilities and your genius upon us. Let us have your fresh point of view. How much do you want? I'll pay you five thousand pounds a year, free of tax. Ah-ah! Wait!" cried Chinchilla, as Jacket showed signs of wanting to interrupt. "Calm! You are not required to sell your soul, neglect your real work, or tie yourself up. You laugh at us; you despise films as they are at present. Say I promise you that everything you have to say—from the *inside*, mark you, and not from a cloudy peak somewhere in the highlands of the written word—will be taken seriously and considered?"

"I like the written word," said Jacket.

"Yes," said Chinchilla, "and you are wise to do so. The Khakhan Genghiz, King of Kings and Emperor of All Men, he conquered the world and made an Empire. But——"

"—the wind blew, the sand of the Gobi Desert covered everything, and nothing is left but a few wise words that he uttered," said Prem, biting off a yawn of pure boredom. "Eeevaah!"

Then there was a little silence: Jacket could hear the ash of his cigar hitting his shoe as it fell.

Chinchilla glared indignantly at Prem, who was being shaken by an upheaval of soundless, joyless laughter.

"Edgar, what the devil is the matter with you?"

"All of a sudden," said Prem, "I remembered *The Bottle of Shadows*."

"Go and lie down, Edgar; go and sleep."

Jacket, who had been pinching his lower lip between two irresolute fingers, said: "If I may, I'll think about it and ring you tomorrow. To tell you the truth, I've had a rather protracted lunch."

"Meanwhile I must go to the Studio," said Chinchilla, rising. "If you have nothing important or amusing to do, why not come along?"

"Why not?" said Jacket. "Yes, I'd like to go with you to the Studio. What goes on today?"

"Nothing much," said Chinchilla, "a detail—one of those very small things that are remembered when the rest of a film is forgotten."

"A mere nothing," said Prem, with a subdued giggle. "A tiny shot; a matter of a hundred feet, no more. Quite simply—a beggar, old and hungry and completely outcast; a creature that once was a man, frozen to the marrow and unable to find a crust to eat or a cigarette-end dry enough to smoke, drags himself to the shelter of a doorway and sits down. He is so tired that he falls asleep. As sleep comes, his poor old face grows so calm and sublime that John Rotherhithe—a wealthy industrialist who is going to shoot the man whom he believes to be his wife's lover—pauses to look. And such is the saintly tranquillity of the sleeping beggar's face, that John Rotherhithe himself feels a holy peace descending upon his soul. All the hate and the rage dies away. He puts his wallet in the beggar's relaxed old hand, and goes away on tiptoe, and lives happily ever after. An actor named Waverley Pickett plays the Beggar. Pickett is a very fine actor, only he has not been able to achieve that last loftiness of expression, that sweetness of repose."

"How long does all this take?" asked Jacket.

"Perhaps fifty or sixty seconds," said Prem.

"Come," said Chinchilla.

Gorod bowed them into a great white car, which purred and shuddered and shot away.

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"This film," said Jacket. "*Is It a Time to be Born?*"

"Yes."

"Is it really true that you paid sixty-five thousand pounds for the story?"

Chinchilla nodded. "The novel sold six million copies," he said.

"Would you say the story was worth that much?"

Chinchilla shrugged. "No story is worth that much," he said.

"If I remember rightly," said Jacket, "it's about a brutal ironmaster whose wife falls in love with a singer. Their love is pure, of course, but the husband thinks otherwise; he schemes and plots, conspires to ruin the singer. But as luck will have it he goes bankrupt, while the singer grows popular and makes a fortune. And the ironmaster discovers that his wife really loves him very dearly in spite of everything. Sixty-five thousand pounds! Good Lord! How long have you been working on it?"

"Six months," said Chinchilla.

"Sixty-five thousand pounds and half a year of your life," said Jacket.

The car topped. Chinchilla got out and ran through a little doorway, indicating with a wave of his hand that Prem and Jacket were at liberty to follow him. They panted at his heels. Two more doors thudded open, and then Jacket found himself in a vast, dim building, full of the jagged shadows of unfamiliar machines and festooned with glossy black rubber cables which dangled, swaying, from the roof, and lay in tortuous coils on the floor. This place was full of strain and breathless quiet. Watchful people were waiting in the half-dark. A voice spoke. Something clicked and hissed, and then cataracts of fierce white light came rushing down. A tall man with glaring eyes was crouching over a camera as large as a locomotive, which was sliding silently towards a disembodied shop-front under a fascia which said *SPURGEON: HERBALIST*. A sickly lamplight gave dreary luminosity to the smeared bull's-eye windows. One could discern the

outlines of a few fantastic jars and antiquated bottles. Here, in a few square feet, some artist had concentrated the melancholy and the mystery of a sad autumn night. There was a prowling cat, dragging a hungry-looking black shadow. In the doorway of the shop sat a thin old man. He looked tired, wretched, and lonely.

"Excuse me, Gerasimov. Excuse me—*no!*" said Chinchilla.

At this, a burly, hairless man with a sterile promontory of glabrous skull, dashed a roll of typescript to the ground and advanced upon Chinchilla with outstretched arms and writhing fingers. For several seconds the burly man called Gerasimov was speechless. Then he recovered his voice, and screamed: "This is too much!"

Big lights went out. Little lights came on.

"What is too much?" said Chinchilla, coldly. "What do you mean?"

"Fifteen times," cried Gerasimov, "Fifteen times I have shot this dirty little shot! Fifteen times! Am I directing this? Or are *you*? Are you trying to insult me? Am I a *child*, am I a fool? Are *you* God Almighty? No, you are not God Almighty! He thrust out his tongue and contorted his face in an absurd grimace. "*Meeeh!* You are *not* God Almighty!"

"What are you talking about?" Chinchilla was angry. "I am telling you, Gerasimov, that this shot is ashes and dust, the way you are——"

"Lies," said Gerasimov. "It is not!"

"Listen to me!"

"I will not listen to you. I do not want to listen to you. You are not God Almighty, and you bore me. *Na!*"

Chinchilla shouted: "I am aware of the fact that I am not God Almighty, little man! Neither are you Gerasimov—your name is Gutkes, in spite of your monocle! I am Chinchilla, and I know what is what. And you are an excitable fool!"

"You *dare* to say this to *me*?"

The old tramp in the doorway had arisen and become

an aged actor. He held out unsteady, placatory hands, and said: "It is all my fault."

"Rubbish, Pickett! You are perfect!" said Chinchilla.

"It's kind of you to say so, but . . . I have tried quite hard, Mr. Chinchilla, but . . ."

"Peace," said Chinchilla, "perfect peace; the peace of God must be upon this poor old face of the beggar, Pickett!"

"You want what does not exist," said Gerasimov. "I am finished, I am through. Fourteen days for this one little shot! No."

"Then go to hell," roared Chinchilla, "get out of my sight! Go back to your jar of alcohol, you abortion! Go to some place where men are children, and therefore believe you! Fake! Miscarriage!"

Gerasimov tried to find words; came up with clutching empty hands, gasping and spluttering out of a whirlpool of rage, and stamped out. Chinchilla sat down on one of the golden chairs out of John Rotherhithe's lounge, and pressed his head between his palms.

"Walter, Walter . . ." murmured Prem.

Chinchilla got up, and his face was awful in the unnatural light. "Pickett," he said, "listen to me. You *can* do this. Think. Imagine. You are old . . ."

"I *am* old," said Pickett, with a sad smile.

"Tired . . ."

"I am tired too."

"Pickett, we are all tired. But for this little minute, my friend, you are old, and tired, and terribly poor. You have no friend, no fire, no roof, no bed: you are the poorest of the poor. Now think—have you ever found yourself dropping off to sleep after a frightful crisis? With a certain wonder, with gratitude and astonishment, you say to yourself: "*At least, God leave me the gift of sleep.*" And just before you slip away, just before your eyes close, you feel yourself smiling. With this smile you are thanking your God. Look. It is something like this . . . Yes, yes, I know what I am saying, Pickett; I know what I mean. Look now."

Chinchilla turned up his collar and sat in the painted doorway. "All your muscles go," he said, relaxing inch by inch. "Your shoulders, your thighs, your belly . . . muscles inside your breast. You sigh. Then your throat goes to sleep, and—hardest of all—the little tough muscles in your head. Imagine that instead of the camera there is only a darkness where the moon ought to be . . . and the night is too long, so much too long; and the dawn is a thousand years away; and you have outlived everything and everybody, and you feel as it were a sensation of kind warmth. God is with you. All your struggles were only a dream. You sigh a little once more, and so you fall asleep. . . ."

Chinchilla closed his eyes, and his head lolled back. His face was so peaceful that it became beautiful—so beautiful that Prem was afraid to look at it, and so still that in the middle of a gasp of admiration Pickett caught his breath and was silent.

A cigarette remained unlit while a match-flame burnt an electrician's fingers. A girl's powder-puff stopped in mid-air. The hairdresser's comb halted in the middle of a lock of somebody's artificial hair.

"That's good," said Jacket. "He can act."

"He has fainted," said the old actor. "He isn't acting."

Prem whispered: "I think that he is dead."

Five minutes later a doctor put away a stethoscope, and Prem, weeping bitterly, covered Chinchilla's face with a white silk handkerchief. "Why?" he asked, "Why, *Why?* What for? What is it all *for?*"

"I don't know," said Jacket, "I wish I did."

"He . . . I . . . Must you go now? Couldn't you stay with me just for an hour or two?"

"Of course I will," said Jacket, looking at his watch. "Only I have to make a phone-call."

On his way to the telephone Jacket overheard something out of a conversation. A script-girl was saying to an assistant director:

"Everybody *swears* his name wasn't *Chinchilla* at all, but

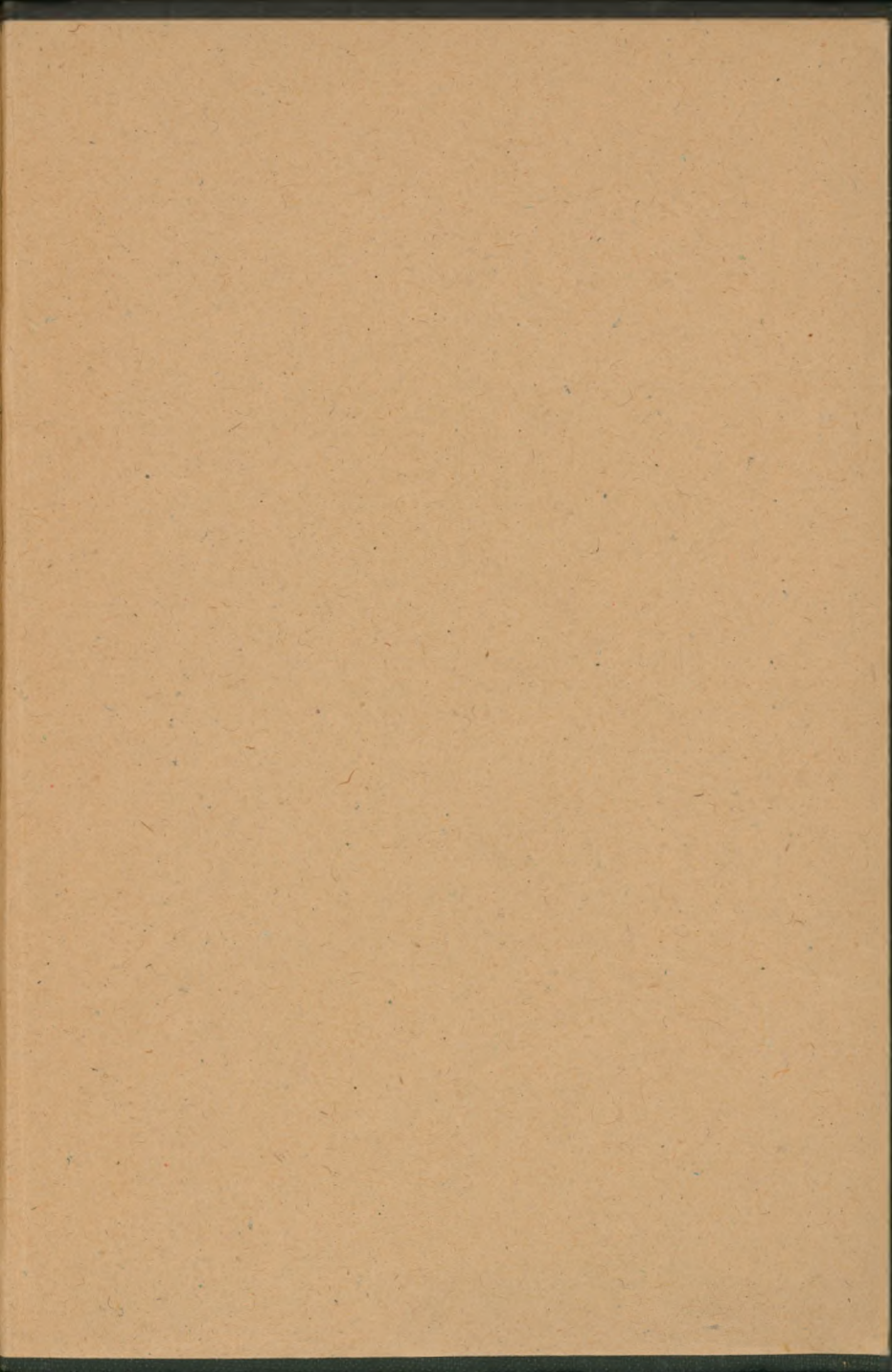
actually Isaac *Rabbit*."

Then Jacket, for a moment, was half-convinced that he felt Time, like a paper tape out of a ticker-machine, jerking away, second by second, to fill a waste-basket. But he shook off a sense of loss as a spaniel shakes off water, and, getting his number, said: "Beatrice, take this. Title: *I Saw Chinchilla Die*."

THE END









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